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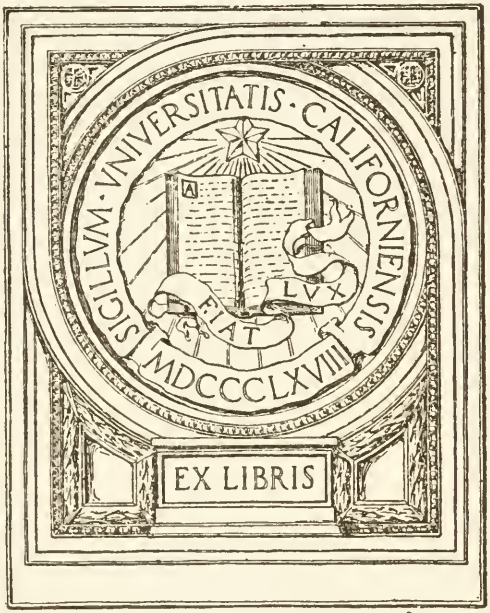

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A Modern Dick Whittington;

— OR —

A Patron of Letters.

BY

JAMES PAYN,

Author of "Lost Sir Massingberd," "By Proxy," &c. &c.

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ERRATUM.

Page 116, fifth line of verse, for *men* read *war*.
Mod. Dick Whittington.

A MODERN DICK WHITTINGTON.

CHAPTER I.

OVER THE WALL.

"So Sir Charles is coming to Hillsland, I hear, Lorry?"

"Yes, for a day or two."

The question and answer were both as indifferent as the human voice could make them. The speakers, in fact, had been talking of something else, of far more importance to both of them, but unhappily they were not agreed upon it. Kate Salesby and Lawrence Merridew were as old friends as their united ages—which were but one-and-forty—permitted them to be, but of late they had differed—though they had never "fallen out"—upon one subject.

The young woman was the elder, and she looked it. Her tall figure, though far from plump, was fully developed; her face, which but

for the kiss of the sun, from which she had taken little pains to protect herself, would have borne comparison with that of any fashionable beauty, had a sedate expression which, while it became her admirably, suggested discretion. It was well for her, one would say, that under the present circumstances she possessed it. The young fellow who was her companion, though by no means so handsome for a man as she for a woman, had great personal attractions. His appearance was peculiar; he had fair curling hair, a delicately chiselled face of bronze, and very dark eyes. Such a contrast might not itself have suited every taste, but the expression of the face was charming; full of intelligence, sympathising, demonstrative, and but a moment ago fervent with passionate appeal. Under the spell of such eloquence of feature, it would have been difficult for any woman, not unsexed, to have resisted him, and it had cost even Kate Salesby a struggle.

As she cast down her beautiful eyes under his passionate glance, they had, however, fallen upon his boots, which, being patched and old, reminded her of certain obstacles to his prayer, absolutely insurmountable, but which for the moment she had almost forgotten. To strengthen her resolve, though it gave her pain, she compelled herself as he went on to take an inventory of his apparel. It had never been of

good material, and it was mended very neatly, but still mended—in half-a-dozen places; even his "wideawake" was frayed at the edges; and it was wonderful (she thought to herself) how well, nevertheless, he looked. Few, few indeed are the human countenances that can overcome the effect of a bad hat, and yet Lawrence Merridew overcame it. He looked a gentleman and something more, and much more, as the girl vaguely recognised, for all the shortcomings of his clothes.

She was but poorly dressed herself, as one of her own sex would have pronounced at once; there were no patches, however, and if she had stood "in silk attire," instead of that simple print, she could not have looked more distinguished. It is strange how often we hear of Nature's noblemen, when Nature's noblewomen, who are much more often met with, are altogether ignored. So far as birth was concerned, however, Kate was much the superior of her companion, for she belonged to one of the oldest families in Cornwall—so old, indeed, that it had worn itself out; whereas the Merridews were *nouveaux riches*, only Lawrence was *nouveau* and not *riche*, as will be presently made plain.

"What you suggest, my dear Lorry," she had been saying, after that review of his raiment, "for I will not call it by so serious a name as a

proposal, is out of the question; it is a dream—delightful, I confess, to me as to you—but from which, as matters stand, were we to indulge in it, we should have indeed a rude awakening. Of your truth and honour I have no doubt; I believe every word you say to me; nay, since you press me, I do not deny that I love you; but love does not blind me as it blinds you. I look—it may seem cruel to you, but I am cruel only to be kind—beyond to-day and even to-morrow. It is my nature, perhaps, to do so, but I have had also a bitter home experience of what comes of *not* looking forward—of trusting to that something good to happen to us which never does happen. How beautiful is this orchard in which we are now standing; how bright and beautiful are these apple blossoms; how cool the long grasses on which we tread; how laden with the coming summer is the air we breathe! But before the year is out these trees will be bare, and their fruit fallen; the ground will be a swamp; it will be difficult to recognise the spot which the spring and the sunlight make so charming to us. So it would be, almost as soon, with your love story if I were weak enough to listen to it; its passion would have passed away, its glory would have faded, through no fault of yours or mine. Poverty—abject poverty—would have blighted it. It is true you only ask for a promise; but when that

is given, how hard it will be to deny you more!"

"I will ask no more, Kitty," he broke in earnestly. "I will be content with your promise."

"You think so now, but you would not think so then; moreover, I should not be content to wait for you indefinitely. I know there are women who, when once they have confessed their love, would be content to wait; but I do not possess their nobility of soul. There is, moreover, another thing, Lorry, you would do well to consider; you rate me too high, you credit me with virtues I do not possess."

"You are good enough for me, Kitty, at all events," he answered gently, "and much better than I deserve."

"I do not say that, though I have no mean opinion of myself. You will be a husband of whom—one day—any woman should be proud; but under present circumstances you are not, as my father would say, 'good enough.' The very thought of him, and the pass to which poverty has brought him and me, hardens my heart against you, Lorry."

She did not look "hard"; her face was full of tenderness, though her voice was firm and even cold. He put his arm out—for he was close by her—to clasp her waist, but she drew back.

"No, Lorry," she said, "not again, nor perhaps ever again. This has gone far enough. I will not be fooled by my own fancy."

"Fancy!" he exclaimed reproachfully. "Do you call your love for me by such a name as that?"

"What other name can better suit it? What is it, as I have said, but a pleasant dream? We are penniless, you and I; and only not beggars because there is no one in the whole wide world to whom we can sue for help. In a little time you will have left England, with what hope of coming back again a prosperous man I need not ask you. Your calling has been chosen for you, and is a distasteful one; and fortunes are not made that way. Yet you wish me to promise to wait here for years and years until you have made one. There is one chance, to be sure, beside. Perhaps your grandfather may provide for you; perhaps, as my father says when he is merry—that is when he is not sober—the heavens may fall, and we may have lark pie for supper. Is your grandfather so fond of you? Is your Uncle Robert, who rules him, likely to advocate your claims upon him? You do not, I know, hope that your mother will die, that you may inherit her scanty income. What is your hope, then? What is the lot in life—at its best, at its brightest—you ask me to share?"

She spoke without contempt, but like one who is conscious that his arguments are irresistible.

The young man bowed his head before them, as though before some physical force.

"You forget that I have my pen," he murmured plaintively.

"Indeed, I do not forget it. Your fine brain, and the fancies that inhabit it, are not the least among the many things for which I love and admire you. I am no judge of such matters, it is true, but I believe you have great talents; nay, since among such surroundings and discouragements you exercise them as you do, it may be even genius that you possess; but even if you do, what then? Genius, as my father says of a goose, is too much for one but not enough for two. It turns a man's head, but not the kitchen spit. Geniuses, even the best of them, are poor, dear Lorry, and setting aside other considerations, better without wives."

"But although I may never be rich, Kitty, I may yet make money, by writing, sufficient for our simple needs."

The girl's lips curled at this; she was not enamoured of such simplicity; "the root and the spring" were too familiar to her to be attractive; but her companion thought that she was expressing incredulity of his literary powers, and it cut him to the heart.

"I believe I have a better chance with my pen than you think, Kitty," he answered gently.

"I did not mean *that*," she replied earnestly, and with a quick flush. "You do not think, you surely do not think, that I was making—well, making light of your talents, Lorry darling; you may think me hard and mercenary, but I am not like that."

She stepped forward, with tears in her eyes, and kissed his cheek. It was a dangerous impulse; the young fellow had been gradually quieting down under his companion's judicious treatment, and it brought about a relapse.

"You do love me a little, then, after all?" he exclaimed triumphantly.

"I love you so much, Lorry, that I will not permit you to ruin yourself for my sake."

"Yes, yes," he answered impatiently. "I understand all that, though I do not agree with it; but what I mean is, if I have a little luck in literature, if I make enough before I go abroad to be an earnest of better fortune ——"

She shook her head. "That will not do, Lorry," she put in resolutely. "That would be promise and not performance, which is the very thing you propose to exact from me."

"But if I made enough by my pen in

England within the year—such an income as would do away with the necessity of my going to Singapore at all—would you give me your promise then?"

"What! If you made an income before you were twenty-one years of age? Well, there can be no harm in saying 'Yes' to that, because it would be a miracle, and miracles do not happen. You no more expect such a thing than I do."

"Still, I have your promise," he answered—it must be confessed, in no very hopeful tone.

"My poor Lorry, it can be but the promise of a promise, the shadow of a shadow; but such as it is you are welcome to it. Now let us give over this unprofitable talk and discourse of something else."

And then it was that she had put the question about Sir Charles Walden's coming to Hillsland; and he had answered that his stay would be for a day or two. She continued, in an amused tone—

"And what is supposed to be Sir Charles's attraction?"

Lawrence shrugged his shoulders. He had really given little thought to the matter, but the indifference born of his present condition—disappointed, denied, almost rejected as he felt himself to be—would have prevented him giving any subject his attention.

"I understand he wishes to make the acquaintance of my grandfather."

At this the young girl burst out laughing; bright and merry as a bugle horn the music of her merriment clove the air; it was no guffaw, such as man, coarse man, indulges in when his sense of humour is inordinately tickled, but yet "so clear and far" it sped that it set the echo that lived in the old lichened wall on the other side of the orchard replying to it.

"You really think that, do you?" she exclaimed, when she got her breath. "Then it will be a sin and a shame indeed, Lorry, if the old fellow leaves you no legacy. Such a compliment deserves a codicil all to itself. Is it likely that his High Mightiness Sir Charles Walden, as learned as the Bishop, though he says his prayers backwards, as fastidious as Lord Chesterfield, and a dandy——" She suddenly stopped.

"Pray go on," said Lawrence, with his eyes on the ground, and as though all talk was now alike to him; "why don't you complete your description of the gentleman's character?"

As she remained dumb, he looked up and saw the reason. Kitty had taken to her heels, and was running down to the gate at the bottom of the orchard like a hare; but over the wall, within three feet of him, were the head and bust of Sir Charles Walden himself—a phenomenon

caused by his being on horseback. He had been riding on the turf by the side of the road, which had dulled the noise of his approach, and how long he had been in his present position—with his hat off, in courtesy doubtless to the fair speaker—it was impossible to guess.

CHAPTER II.

THE FRANKNESS OF YOUTH.

"FORGIVE me for my intrusion, Mr. Lawrence, for I fear I *have* intruded," said the horseman, with a smile and a bow, but in taking a short cut to your esteemed grandfather's house, I have, as often happens with short cuts, gone a little astray; perhaps you will kindly put me in the right way."

The graciousness of the tone, the polish of the speech, could not have been exceeded; the face of the speaker, too, beamed with politeness, but there was a twinkle in his eye which to Lawrence was terrible, for it said, "All is known to me, my amorous youth."

To young people of the middle-class, everybody with a title, especially in the country, has a certain importance; but upon Lawrence Merridew (who was unusually exempt from such weaknesses) the lord lieutenant of the county himself would have made little impression as an involuntary confidante compared with Sir Charles

Walden, quite apart from the fact that he had just heard himself called "a dandy" and other injurious epithets. The baronet was a very remarkable person indeed, and one whose rank and wealth formed but a small portion of his eminence. Lawrence, though it seemed the other knew even his Christian name, had met him but once on a public occasion—a village flower show—but he knew all about him (or, rather, thought he knew), like everyone else in West Cornwall. As learned, as Kitty had said (only with that unfortunate addition about his prayers), as the Bishop of the diocese, more polite than anyone who had ever been heard of except in books, and fitted equally to shine at a meeting of the Royal Society or in a ball-room, Sir Charles Walden was a recluse, though far, far indeed, from being an ascetic. He was said in one sense—the county sense—to "live alone" at Hurlby Castle, because he discouraged all visitors; but scandal painted him as by no means without society of a certain kind, and as having more than one reason—indeed, a whole seraglio of them—for seclusion. Nobody knew whether it was true or not, because nobody ever got the chance of knowing.

He had been a great traveller, but for years had never left his splendid home, though he was understood to still maintain relations with the great world without, including the highest in

the land; in what was, comparatively speaking, his youth, he had formed one of her Majesty's Ministers, in a subordinate post, it is true, but filled with such success and completeness as promised the highest honours in the future. At the same time he had been one of the most prominent figures (though not, perhaps, the most popular, for his cynicism forbade it) in society; the idol of that courtly circle where wit shines the brighter for the atmosphere of dulness in which it shines, and where what is not conventional seems almost to resemble genius; a patron of the turf; as audacious at the gaming table (it was said of him) as though he had the Bank of England at his back; a man of gallantry; a lover of the muse; a pamphleteer, and something more, in letters; in short, within limits, an Admirable Crichton.

Then suddenly—none knew for certain why, except, of course, that a woman was at the bottom of it—the gay world knew its *persona grata* no more. Sir Charles fled the town, and after years of travel buried himself alive in his distant and secluded castle. For the moment his departure made him more talked about than ever, but in a few days his story paled and faded as in a dissolving view, before some other London scandal, and save in a few discreet boudoirs, or snug smoking-rooms, was discussed no more.

In the country, however, it was different. His very naughtiness (if he *had* been naughty) was an attraction where gossip found so little to feed upon. Bluebeard himself, we read, was not unpopular among the county families till the actual revelation of his crimes; and Sir Charles was known to be unmarried, which immensely added to his prestige. There were probably very few young ladies in Cornwall who would not have been prepared to put up with a little eccentricity and to forgive a few vague peccadilloes, in exchange for thirty thousand a year and a castle. It could not, indeed, be said of Sir Charles, as in the ballad, that he was "over young to marry yet," but he was "admirably preserved," as if for that very purpose. "A woman," it is said, "is as old as she looks." If that test had been applied to Sir Charles as he now sat upright on his three-hundred-guinea nag, attired in a perfectly-fitting riding-suit, he was forty-five at most. If he had been a labouring man, in smock frock and hobnailed boots, with the usual amount of rheumatism about his bent shoulders, he would have been twenty years older.

To Lawrence's eyes this man looked like one who, save for the stroke of death, was above the reach of Fate; he had everything at his command of which he himself had nothing. Power, worship, wealth, accomplishments, learning, knowledge of mankind; and he felt not a little

complimented that so exalted a personage should have addressed him by his Christian name. The recognition of a face, the recollection of a name, was one of the many gifts of Sir Charles, and one which before now had stood him in good stead. He well understood that the very humblest of human beings has a respect for his own identity, and that a slight is more resented than an insult; for the latter may be given in the heat of passion, whereas the former can only arise from habitual contempt. He had set his foot on many an enemy, but never made one by disdain. He was a cynic to his backbone, but he sneered only at principles, not at those who acted on them. His conduct was exactly the reverse of those who "do not speak evil of dignities, but of the people who fill them." Such was his attitude to the world at large; but when he disliked anyone his tongue was a flail. It was never said of him, however, as of many persons, that he was pleasant when pleased, because (which is a very different thing) he was always pleasant unless displeased; his charm of manner was inadequately described as capable of "luring the bird from the bough"—it could lure her from her very nest; he was said to have once extracted five pounds for the poor from the vicar of Hillsland's pocket—a feat which could only be appreciated by those who knew that ecclesiastic. With the recollection of all these things

(but of that especially) in his mind, Lawrence vaulted lightly over the wall, and in answer to the other's request to be put in the way to Hillsland Hall, replied cheerfully, "I am at your service, Sir Charles." Many a true word is spoken in jest, and sometimes, as in this case, in mere courtesy.

"It is curious, considering how long I have been in this part of the country, that I have never but once been inside your grandfather's house," observed the baronet, as they moved on slowly together, his fiery but well-trained steed at once accommodating itself to the pace of the pedestrian. "But I am as difficult to be drawn from my hermitage as a badger. It struck me as being a very imposing mansion indeed."

"It is big enough," answered the young fellow in a tone the indifference of which bordered on contempt.

"And holds a good many people, I understand."

"Oh, yes, it has tenants enough." The tone had now turned absolutely sarcastic, and seemed to imply the addition, "and to spare."

"Why, you speak of it, my young friend, as if it was a warren," exclaimed Sir Charles, with great amusement.

"It *is* a warren, though it looks like a

a lunatic asylum," returned the other doggedly.

"Now this is really interesting," said the baronet, as if to himself. "You are the very person of all others, my dear sir, I wanted to meet with; intelligent, observant, and straightforward. A little bird has told me all that of you before, and more, but I suspected exaggeration."

"A little bird!" echoed the youth, with a puzzled look.

"Well, yes, if an angel, though wingless, may be so termed. It was Miss Ruth Stratton, with whom I had some charming conversation on the same day that I had the pleasure of making your own acquaintance."

"It was fortunate for me that it was Cousin Ruth who gave you my character," answered the young fellow. "If it had been any other of my relations (save my dear mother), you would not feel much inclined to be civil to me."

"I don't know that; I am in the habit of judging character for myself," said Sir Charles, smiling. "Moreover, when one man gives an ill report of another, it has to be considered what his opinion is worth. One may say to me, 'So-and-so is an idle young fellow, who will never make sixpence,' for instance, and I may ask myself, 'But how does *he* know?' He

may not be very diligent in his own vocation, and have lost a good many sixpences when he thought to make them himself."

"That was the parson," observed Lawrence composedly.

"Well guessed: yes, it was the Rev. Arthur Grueby. Why should I not say so, since so far from the information being given in confidence, it was obviously for distribution. But he is not a relation, I presume; only a candid friend of yours."

"He is a friend of the family, at all events, a standing dish at the Hall. You will be sure to meet him at dinner to-night."

"A charming prospect! But we were speaking of your relatives, 'a little more than kin and less than kind,' as you tell me, and indeed, thanks to the little bird, I know, of course: I wish to hear no secrets, but if you will give me the *carte du pays*—for these good folk are almost entire strangers to me, and you and I are already friends I feel—I should be infinitely obliged to you. Now, there is your Uncle Robert ——"

"There is, unfortunately, yes," interrupted Lawrence bitterly.

"So bad as that, is it? He struck me chiefly (like one better known in society) as being a very tall man; but he has doubtless other characteristics."

"I would rather you discovered them for yourself, sir. I cannot trust myself to speak of Robert Stratton as he deserves." The speaker's voice trembled with emotion, the nature of which could be read in his flashing eyes and knitted brow.

Sir Charles leant forward in his saddle and laid his hand gently on his companion's shoulder—

"Forgive me, Lawrence, for touching so tender a chord. It is one of the painful riddles of the world that sensitive natures should so often be at the mercy of those of coarser fibre—in other words, of mere brutes. It happens, however, constantly to the female sex, and they give us a noble example of patience and endurance. That is a philosophic reflection, you may well observe, that can do no good to anybody; let us rather hope that a time may come when you may have an opportunity of repaying this gentleman for his many obligations. Now as to grandpapa, who is nominally, at least, my host; what am I likely to make of him?"

"I know nothing about him," replied Lawrence indifferently, "except that he wears a long white beard and a skull-cap, and looks like a magician. He is much too great a personage to trouble himself about my existence. I have hardly seen him a dozen times in my life."

"What! Not seen your own grandfather, who lives under the same roof?"

"Not three times for the last six months."

"This is really delightful," said Sir Charles, with an air of exceeding relish. "I wouldn't have missed it for worlds. By-the-bye, I hope I shall not miss your grandfather; it was the prospect of his society with which your uncle lured me to Hillsland."

"Oh, he'll see *you* quick enough, no doubt. It is only that it is not worth his while to see people generally, but secludes himself in his own apartments. He was a very great man in the East, it seems, indeed."

"Really! Not the Grand Llama, surely? *He* keeps himself to himself like that."

"He was a Commissioner, I believe."

"A commissionaire?"

"No, no," answered the young fellow, laughing in spite of himself; it was difficult to be cheerless and despondent in Sir Charles's company. "He was the Governor of some Indian province, and he can never forget it. He thinks that all of us ought to salaam and prostrate ourselves before him."

"And *do* you?"

"Those who are admitted to his presence approach it, I believe, on all fours; that is

one of the reasons which makes exile from it tolerable to me."

"And has he no favourites?"

"Yes, Ruth enjoys that distinction."

"It is not surprising; she is a charming young woman."

"Yes, but what is remarkable, she actually likes *him*. I say to her sometimes, 'You will be liking Uncle Robert next.'"

"And what does she say to that?"

"Oh, then she only laughs; because, of course, such a thing is impossible."

"But there is a Mrs. Robert Stratton, is there not? Doesn't she like her husband?"

"Adores him."

"Come, that shows there must be some good in your uncle, after all."

"Not at all. It only shows my aunt is a fool."

"Well, upon my life, young gentleman, for candour——"

"I beg your pardon, and her pardon," put in Lawrence impulsively. "I had no right to say anything of the kind. The notion of people liking Uncle Robert puts me out of all patience with them; but his wife is delicate and tender-hearted, and believes in her husband, who I must say takes a great deal of care of her, though doubtless for some wicked end."

"You are a good hater, Master Lawrence," said Sir Charles, with a keen glance at his young companion.

"I have good cause to be," replied the young fellow curtly. "There is the Hall upon your left."

CHAPTER III.

FATHER AND SON.

WHATEVER might be said against Hillsland Hall, it had certainly size to recommend it; no one could call it "a one-horse affair," or even a pair-horse; it was a four-horse van—a caravan—of the first magnitude. As to its architecture, it had something to suit almost every taste, and a great deal that suited none. It was commenced by Mr. Stratton's orders, so that when he arrived in England he should find a mansion suitable to his position and requirements, and the architect who had been entrusted with it had, perhaps in obedience to his patron's injunctions that it should be "light and airy," leant to the Italian style.

It was a palace with a verandah running round it, a hall of great splendour in its centre paved with exquisite mosaic, and as many apartments, all more or less draughty, as an American hotel. The Commissioner had so far approved, but requested that something should be

imparted to it to remind the beholder of the gorgeous East. Whereupon certain minarets had been erected side by side with the campanilla, and so much more air introduced that when the shivering proprietor came home to it he found it utterly uninhabitable. Then another architect was called in, who, if he could have had his will, would not have left one stone upon another, but who was obliged to content himself with fronting the pile anew, so that it had the resemblance of a gigantic toy, enclosed, for purposes of travel, in a Gothic box. But even that did not keep the draughts from being too much for the Commissioner's delicate frame; he had forgotten during his gilded exile what the English climate was, even in Cornwall, and it was brought to his remembrance in a very unpleasant manner. So that within his castle he had, as it were, built another for warmth and comfort—which afterwards turned out very useful for seclusion—a suite of rooms, guarded by double doors hung with heavy curtains, and paved with carpets on which a horse soldier could have galloped without making the least noise. At first he had gone about a bit, in fear, but of late years had been confined almost entirely to these apartments by age, infirmity, or as some said, by sheer ill-temper at finding himself held by his neighbours in such small account.

When this Satrap had taken the air in his

own province, a thousand dusky forms had prostrated themselves before him in token of their awe and submission; whereas at Hillsland, if some rustic pulled his forelock in acknowledgment of his presence, it was the most he could expect. Often as not, Hodge only wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and remarked to his fellow, "That there's the naybob, Jim; him as used to ride a helefant." In former days a languid clap of his hands would be responded to "with obedient start" by a score of servitors; now it only brought old Hassam, the only native who had followed his fortunes, to his master's side. On the other hand, it must be confessed that the ex-Commissioner was very much "looked up to" (not perhaps in a moral sense, but as from low to higher, not to say highest) by his family, which were numerous and of unusually varied stocks. His word was law to them when he condescended so low as to give them a word, which was very seldom. What he had to say in the way of direction and command was said by deputy, through his only surviving son, Mr. Robert Stratton.

This gentleman was his father's right-hand man in every department of life; even his adviser, though he would never have been so foolish as to hint as much; the ex-Commissioner was the Sultan, with the power of life and death, as it were, over all his belongings, and

his son was but his Grand Vizier, only he played that part with such consummate skill that he did in fact rule his master. All ordinary transactions the deputy performed with a success that was really considerable, and so far as his master knew to the contrary, absolutely complete; and then those extraordinary ones which seemed to require tact and delicacy he performed too, only without them. For example, he was his father's almoner; every relative who had his home at the Hall—or rather, called it home, for the word was certainly a misnomer—was wholly dependent upon its lord and master, and none ever received their doles without Mr. Robert reminding them of the fact that it was the bread of dependence. He himself, though it was whispered he took good care that his own services were well remunerated, was under no obligation in this respect. He was not indeed rich in his own right, and to say truth had at one time been in very low water indeed; but before the tide had left him absolutely bare and dry he had had the luck to marry an heiress. This had been the initial factor in the ex-Commissioner's respect for him; to find one of his family doing well for himself had filled him with astonishment and admiration; and having once got his foot in the door that led to the old man's confidence, Robert had pushed his way in.

The two were closeted together, when their

expected visitor and Lawrence Merridew came in sight of the Hall, in the ex-Commissioner's sanctum. It was a moderate-sized apartment, but furnished with much luxury and even magnificence. On the ceiling's lustrous blue were painted Eastern birds of gorgeous hue, which seemed to wing their native skies; on the tall screens that fenced the occupant from every draught were depicted the sports or pursuits in which he had taken part when engaged in shaking the pagoda tree, a tiger hunt, or a battue of peacocks, the procession of some native prince, or an Indian durbar. The walls were hung with shining spears, matchlocks inlaid with silver, and daggers, their handles rough with gold and bright with jewels. The air of the room was not only oppressively warm to persons in good health, but heavy with the scent of sandal-wood, of which most of the furniture was composed.

The habitual tenant of this chamber was as alien-looking and foreign to our idea of what is English as its contents. He was an old man, as his silver hair and long white beard testified, but a still more convincing witness was the network of wrinkles that covered his sunburnt face from brow to chin; so fine and so numerous were they that they produced the effect of an exquisitely delicate and elaborate tattoo. But under his still black brows his dark eyes sparkled yet, and spoke

of the vigour and vitality that were left in him. He was attired in a flowing dressing-gown of richest silk which, as he lay propped up by cushions on an ebony couch, reached to his scarlet slipper; on his head was a black skull-cap, and between his bloodless lips the amber mouthpiece of a hookah which, with coil on coil, like a serpent shining in the sun, wound itself at last into a glass receptacle at his feet. Only when he spoke was the monotonous "hubble-bubble" of the instrument, to which air and fire and water all contributed, intermitted; it seemed a part of its proprietor's breathing apparatus, and to go on for "ever." In front of his skull-cap sparkled a huge diamond; on his long, brown fingers were rings of the same precious stones; he was immensely fat, and around his middle was a cord of tasselled silk that looked like a girdle of gold. Upon the whole he looked more like some pagod than a man at all, and the more so from the strong contrast his appearance presented to that of his companion and only son.

Robert Stratton was tall and somewhat spare, but very powerfully built. As a young man—and he was now but middle-aged with brown hair still clustering over his forehead untinged with grey—he must have been handsome, and might have been so still but for a saturnine and almost sinister expression that marred his fea-

tures. Even when he smiled this did not wholly disappear. It is a provision of nature that after the exercise of certain qualities for a long term of years, they are to be read in a man's face, for the warning or encouragement of his fellows; on the other hand nature, careful of the tiger as of the lamb, helps him, when the impression produced is bad, to counteract their effect. Mr. Robert Stratton had, when he chose to use it, a melodious voice, which, coming from one of his stature, seemed itself an affability, and which, with those who had not the ill-fortune to know him, often disarmed suspicion. Indeed, in one case at least, where, if anywhere, one would have thought he was well known—that of his wife—it altogether redeemed him. The soft nothings which he had indulged in before marriage were still whispered into the same ears, and believed by them, as then, to have a genuine significance. This gentleness of speech, however, which when employed in her case was merely a safeguard, became to others a weapon of offence more terrible than the loudest tongue, and he made use of it habitually, even in anger. He is standing with his back to the fire—for the fire, like the vestal flame, burns perpetually in the old Indian's room—but not, as would have been the case elsewhere, with his coat-tails under his arms; it would have been an attitude too easy, and savouring of disrespect in the presence

of one so exalted as the ex-Commissioner. Mr. Robert never forgot the subject in the son.

"He is sure not to disappoint us, I suppose," the old man was saying, with the frown that had ploughed those parallel lines on his wrinkled brow.

"I should hope, indeed, sir, he would not venture upon such a proceeding. It is true Sir Charles is said to be the creature of caprice, but he would surely think twice—and thrice—before treating a man of your position with such disrespect. Moreover, he expressed to me at the flower-show the very great pleasure with which he looked forward to making your acquaintance; 'A man,' he said, 'of unique attainments and quite exceptional administrative capacity. I never leave my hermitage,' he added, 'as you know, to mingle in ordinary society, but your father is no ordinary man.'"

All this was delivered in a mellifluous tone, but so distinct that not a word was lost, though it was clear from the other's putting a hollowed hand up to his ear that his hearing had somewhat failed him. At every complimentary observation the small cap nodded courteous approval, and the hubble-bubble seemed to breathe satisfaction.

"It is something," the old gentleman replied, "to find one's efforts in a distant land, and on behalf of another race, appreciated by

such a student of mankind as Sir Charles Walden. You think, however, there may have been another attraction for him at Hillsland."

"A secondary one, yes; Ruth certainly seemed to take his fancy."

"It is no wonder; her mother was very handsome; and she has also a resemblance to poor Cyril."

There was a silence for once, the hubble-bubble ceased, the amber mouthpiece of the nargileh had dropped unnoticed from the smoker's lips. Robert Stratton's hand went up to the smooth shaven face to hide the sneer which every reference to his dead brother always evoked; he was jealous of him though he had been so long in his grave; jealous of the place he still held in his father's memory; jealous of the orphan daughter whose beauty, gentleness, and courage endeared her to all in that many-peopled house save him.

CHAPTER IV.

HOW THE DINNER PARTY WAS ARRANGED.

"WHO was with you at the flower-show beside Ruth?" inquired the ex-Commissioner, after a long pause.

"Jane."

"Umph!" The monosyllable was somehow not complimentary to Jane. The tone in which it was uttered seemed to imply that if there was another attraction at Hillsland Hall beside its proprietor and his granddaughter it was not likely to be Jane. She was, nevertheless, an important personage there; next to her father and her brother Robert, the most important, and one who, since she managed and supervised the whole household, it was even more expedient to be on good terms with, if possible; but this was not easy to accomplish.

The other daughters of the house, Mrs. Merridew and Mrs. Lock, were both widows; but they had at one time of course possessed husbands, which had not happened to their elder

sister, and that circumstance, some said, had soured her. But this explanation was only given by charitable persons, who had had no experience of Jane before she became of a marriageable age. She had been always sour; a crab-apple to begin with, of which no amount of skill and culture could have made a sweet apple. There was nothing about her like an apple; she was more like a pear—a prickly one—which, let it hang as long as it will, never grows mellow. She had been hanging for nearly forty years, and only grew harder and harder.

"It would have been better to let Mrs. Merridew chaperon Ruth," continued the old man, with irritation; "the child is never like herself—that is, at her best—with Jane. She should have been accompanied by someone for whom she has a liking."

"Lawrence was with her."

"I thought you said there was no one but you there," exclaimed the old man angrily. "Why do you attempt to deceive me?"

"I should not be so foolish as to do that, sir, even if I were wicked enough," returned the other, smiling. "When I said nobody, save us three, were present on the occasion to which you refer, I had forgotten Lawrence, who, in fact, *is* nobody."

"He is my grandson."

"But unworthy, as you yourself have said,

sir," replied the other hastily, "to be remembered as such."

"Remembered? Why do you say *remembered?*" In his indignation the old gentleman turned his slippered feet off the sofa (as if they, too, had offended him), and sat up. "You are thinking of my will."

This was a subject, it was true, that was very often in Mr. Robert Stratton's thoughts; but at that moment nothing was further from them; a more groundless accusation was never made.

"You shock me, sir; you positively shock me," he replied with emotion. "If I used an inappropriate term you should remember that it is not every one who has the gift of expressing themselves in the fittest words as you have. I am surely not to blame, considering the undutiful and thankless manner in which the boy has behaved to you, for forgetting your relationship; whenever I see him, I say to myself (thinking of your goodness and the return it has met with) can that be your grandson?"

"I don't wonder at it, when you let him go about in clothes that would disgrace a scavenger! My grandson! Why, he looks more like my cow-boy."

"But nobody ever sees him," objected Mr. Robert gently.

"*I* see him—or, at least, I saw him three or four days ago—from this very window."

This argument was unanswerable. It would have been very true, but very injudicious, to have observed that Mr. Stratton had seen his grandson a good many times in very indifferent apparel, without the circumstance attracting his attention. As he ignored his existence, it was only reasonable to conclude that he ignored his clothes; but opposition was a thing that the ex-Commissioner detested only less than any reference to his own demise. That unhappy word, "remembered" had filled him with indignation, which, curiously enough, was taking the unexpected direction of a fashionable fit-out for Lawrence Merridew.

"Has he no other clothes than those disreputable rags in which he met my eye?" inquired the old gentleman, now almost foaming at the mouth.

"Certainly, sir, he has his Sunday suit, which I will take care he wears till others have been provided for him; I need not say that when he went to the flower-show he was suitably appareled."

"I hope so, indeed. Why, suppose Sir Charles was to see him as I saw him!"

"That, sir," said Mr. Robert earnestly (it was the very moment in which the expected guest had arrived with Lawrence on the hill-top), "is to the last degree unlikely; but I will take steps to render it impossible."

"All the preparations for Sir Charles's reception have, I conclude, been made, Robert."

"You may rest assured of that, sir; I do not think, so far as his comforts are concerned, that he will find anything to make him regret his visit."

"The great point is, however, that he may be induced to repeat it. Whatever caprice he exhibits—and I am told he is full of caprices—must of course be indulged. His likes and dislikes should be very carefully attended to."

"I have made his character my study, sir, from the moment that your intelligence suggested to me the advantage of his alliance. His aversion to society, for example, has caused me to invite—that is, in your name, of course—no one to meet him to-night except Grueby."

"And why Grueby? I thought Sir Charles disliked parsons?"

"Well, you see, Grueby is not very much like a parson; indeed, he is rather, so to speak, on the other side, and he knows about sporting matters, in which Sir Charles takes some interest. They are also already acquainted."

"Do you think that an advantage—to Grueby?" inquired the old gentleman cunningly.

Mr. Robert's huge frame shook with admiring laughter. "Capital, capital!" he spluttered. "How rare is the gift of humour! What sagacity, too—what knowledge of human

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life!" Then, with an effort after seriousness, "Grueby, of course, does not recommend himself to you, sir, but there are natures—and high ones, too—that love to stoop. I think Sir Charles takes pleasure in the man."

"Well, well," returned the other, much mollified, "so long as you don't put me next to him. By-the-bye, how have you arranged that matter? I mean the dinner-table. Sir Charles will be on my right hand, of course."

"Most certainly—when the ladies have withdrawn."

At that pause there was a struggle in the hubble-bubble as though it were choking.

"I have the list here," continued Robert, pulling a paper from his pocket, and fixing his eyes on it with great earnestness, to avoid the glare of indignation with which he was well aware he was being regarded. "Our guest, of course, must have a lady on either side of him, He will take my wife in to dinner."

"I thought she was indisposed—too delicate and that sort of thing for dinner parties," growled the old gentleman.

"That is so; but on an occasion of this kind, in which, as she has been told, you feel a particular interest, she will not shrink from a little exertion. It was her own proposal."

"I don't believe a word of it," cried the ex-Commissioner. "Man proposes and disposes too

in your case. It was her husband who put it into her head, I'll warrant."

"It was indeed I who mentioned to her the possible importance of the entertainment," observed Mr. Robert softly; "but she herself at once expressed her willingness to further its intention. "'I am not so ill,' she said, 'but that I can do something.'"

"Humph! it won't be much, then; parties are not in her way. She's an invalid."

If the ex-Commissioner had said, "She is sure to get drunk," his tone could not have expressed greater dissatisfaction. "Now, Mrs. Merridew has been used to society—the very best."

"Let us hope so, since she paid such a price for it," answered the other drily. "My wife, however, has not been unaccustomed to see quite as eminent persons as Sir Charles Walden at her father's table. If he did not represent his borough in Parliament himself, he returned the man that did."

"Shoddy, my dear Robert, shoddy; there is something in social position that no money can buy. You may have lakhs and lakhs of rupees, but if you are uncovenanted, where are you? I have not, however, a word to say against Mrs. Robert, if you can keep her off her symptoms and her remedies; but I will not have her emptying her medicine chest over any guest of

mine. Well, on the other side of Sir Charles you will put Ruth of course."

"Indeed, sir, I think that would be hardly judicious. She is very young, and has no right to any such position."

"What, my granddaughter, and the daughter of my eldest son, no right? Then I should like to see the girl who *had* rights."

"I was merely referring to her tender years, sir. It is not usual—at least in *this* country, where infant marriages are discouraged—to place the guest of the evening next a young, unmarried girl. It would also have an undesirable significance. Mrs. Merridew is, as you were observing, in every way qualified to be Sir Charles's left-hand neighbour."

"Well, well, arrange it as you please. We shall be but a small party, and all pretty close together. With Jane I make eight of us at present. Is that right?"

"Quite right, sir. One less than the Muses is, I believe, the orthodox prescription for a dinner party. With Aunt Jerry we should be one too many, and for other reasons she had better be out of it."

"Aunt Jerry is certainly not much like a Muse," admitted the ex-Commissioner.

"Unless it is the Muse of Ancient History," smiled Mr. Robert; "she seems to remember nothing that did not happen thirty years ago."

"Things were better worth remembering then than they are now," observed the other sententiously. Mr. Robert looked up in surprise; it was rarely indeed that his father ever gave way to sentiment. "I can recall Aunt Jerry, as you call her," he went on, with a look that seemed to search the past, "as pretty as Ruth. Lock, too, was a handsome young fellow, and when he married her was counted one of the richest men in the county."

"He might have kept his money, too," observed Robert, with a keen glance of significance at his father, "but for his thinking that 'Tom Tiddler's ground' was underground instead of above it."

"There are mines and mines," observed the old gentleman coolly, "and even in lead mines there are chances of recovery. The Common Wheal, for example, was said to be exhausted in Lock's time, and now it bids fair to head the market. He was an unfortunate fellow in everything except his marriage, was Lock."

"And that was very unfortunate for *us*," remarked Mr. Robert acidly. "I can imagine a man who has little to lose of his own taking great risks, but for a man of means to run the chance of beggary in the hopes of getting a little richer is in my opinion the act of a madman."

"That sounds very well, and would look

very nice in a copy-book, Robert; it is a pity you have no children to profit by your moral reflections. By-the-bye, there is the boy Lawrence; what is to be done with him to-night?"

"He will dine with Aunt Jerry in her own apartments, and so be kept out of the way."

CHAPTER V.

LAWRENCE AND HIS RELATIVES.

"YONDER is the carriage, with my rascal Thornton behind it," exclaimed Sir Charles, as Lawrence and he looked down on the Hall from the hill-top. "Your people will be wondering why I have not already made my appearance, so with your good leave and many thanks for your guidance we will part company for the present. It is just as well, perhaps, that you and I should not be known as friends."

It was an act of consideration—and something more—that his companion thoroughly appreciated, for thereby Sir Charles not only showed that he understood his young friend's position in the household, but declared himself his ally. Where he was mistaken, as Lawrence bitterly reflected, was in his expectation that they should soon meet again, as, for instance, at the dinner table. He knew, as well as though he had been present at the interview then going on between his grandfather and his Uncle

Robert, that he would not be one of the guests. Though twenty years of age, and much better fitted for companionship than anyone within ten miles of Hillsland, Lawrence generally dined early, like a child, and had supper by himself, or sometimes a "meat tea" with Aunt Jerry; this was not for economy or convenience, but simply an arrangement of Uncle Robert's designed for the humiliation of the boy; it failed in its intent, for Lawrence much preferred to take his evening meal, as he would have preferred to take every other, apart from his enemy, and he had so much else and worse to resent in his kinsman's conduct towards him that this slight seemed but a flea-bite.

How a hatred between two human beings first begins (on one side) it is sometimes difficult to discover; there are such layers and layers of it as time goes on that what cast the original shade—though it was at the time distinct enough—has become undistinguishable. We talk of death ending such dislikes, and it may be so in the case of the one who is first to go, for "in the grave," we are told, "there is no remembrance"; but it is not so in that of the other. In some cases, and subject to religious influence, he may forgive, or think that he forgives, but even if he would he cannot forget. It is not in human nature. There had probably never been a time when Robert Stratton had not disliked

his nephew, Lawrence Merridew. His father had been a Guardsman, and Robert's social superior; for a few years he had been looked up to as a feather in the cap of the family. They had not grudged him the money he took out of it as his wife's dower, because they thought they would have received its equivalent in social consideration. But Colonel Merridew, who drove four-in-hand and was an authority at White's on most subjects, and whose movements were recorded in the "Fashionable Intelligence" as a matter of positive interest, was a very different person from that gallant officer after he had succumbed to an attack of chicken-hazard (though it had lasted but ten hours), and not only lost his whole fortune (which indeed, thanks to previous inroads of the same complaint, would have been a small matter), but almost all that of his wife also.

When he died of a fever, some years afterwards, in by no means well-furnished lodgings, he left little behind him, save Lawrence, who—though a comfort to his mother—was hardly looked upon at Hillsland Hall as an acquisition. His being so comely, and for his age so bright and intelligent, did not count for much in his favour. Such gifts were, indeed, absolutely against him with his uncle—who had no share in them—and with sour Aunt Jane. If he had been a Stratton, they might have attracted his

grandfather, as, indeed, though she was of the wrong sex, they did in Ruth's case; if his eldest son, though nothing to boast about, but rather the contrary—had left a son and heir, things might have been different with the ex-Commissioner in his old age.

Robert, who had never had his father's affection, though he had now (by no means without hard striving) his ear and trust, was childless, a circumstance which caused him the bitterest disappointment. Perhaps one of the reasons why he hated Lawrence was because, though only in the female line, he was the sole male of his generation in the family. Jealousy of this kind is as common in ordinary households as in those of the blood royal.

Robert had stood between the lad and his grandfather's favour from the first, and had so contrived to keep him out of the old man's presence that, as we have seen, it took some extraordinary incident to remind him even of his existence; and with every wrong that he did the boy, he hated him more and more. Now that Lawrence had grown up, actual ill-usage had become dangerous, for though the uncle had thews and sinews far superior to those of his junior, the latter would by no means have submitted to it, but would have used any weapon that came handy; and moreover there would have been the public scandal. In later years,

therefore, Uncle Robert, with the exception of such small personal humiliations as excluding him from the late dinner party, had confined himself to striking at Lawrence through his mother, a mode of attack which involved the minimum of danger while inflicting the maximum of pain.

Mrs. Merridew, though far from a wise woman, as her marriage had shown, had been at one time as engaging in manners as she was attractive in person. To say that there had been no one in the family who could vie with her in high spirits and conversation was no high compliment, for they were a dull lot; but she had been the light, not only of the Hall, but of the neighbourhood. Now all her gaiety had fled, or rather, what remained of it had done so—for her nature was elastic and could have borne anything but the dead weight of contempt and neglect that had been imposed on it—had died out, spark after spark. The one joy left her in life was her Lorry; and Lawrence, she was told, was worthless and a ne'er-do-well. Her sister, Miss Jane, had detected this fact even earlier than her brother Robert, and neither of them hesitated to communicate to her the discovery.

If he was so clever, they said, how was it that he had not distinguished himself at the school to which his grandfather had so generously

sent him? It was not an expensive school, but it was quite true that but for the ex-Commissioner's aid, Mrs. Merridew would have found a difficulty in giving the lad an education at all. Why had he not got a scholarship and gone to college, and maintained himself like other clever boys, instead of being a burthen on his mother? She did not feel him to be a burthen, far from it, but the epithet stung her to the quick, as it was meant to do. She had no choice but to leave the lad and his future in their cruel hands. It had finally been decided that in a few months Lawrence was to go out to Singapore, where his grandfather's influence had obtained for him a clerkship in some commercial firm. It was an employment far from suitable to him, but "beggars must not be choosers," as Miss Jane had put it with her usual frankness.

In that great house there were several persons who pitied his lot, and the misery which his exile would entail upon his mother, but they were powerless to avert it. All the servants adored Master Lorry, who had a smile and a kind word for everybody; and they liked him none the less because they knew he was no favourite with Uncle Robert and Aunt Jane. Perhaps his most powerful ally was Mrs. Robert, who had actually expressed an opinion that the lad was harshly treated; but her husband had only smiled and patted her cheek, and said that she

was too gentle and kind for this world, and did not know what was good for those cast in a rougher mould; as for fretting about the young fellow going so far away, as she seemed almost inclined to do (for she was easily moved to tears), he was obliged to remind her that the doctors had all warned her against fretting. The recollection of this circumstance and the conviction of her husband's solicitude about her, had reduced her sympathies for her sister-in-law and her child within very reasonable limits. She was an invalid, as the master of the house had termed her, of a very inoffensive but pronounced kind. The state of her own constitution was the paramount consideration with her, and though she was only "delicate," and seldom actually ill, she would perhaps have hardly welcomed a state of rude health, even had it been within her reach. She was accustomed to a hot-house existence, and preferred the care and petting it procured her, to being let alone and the open air.

Aunt Jerry, too, had a tenderness for Lawrence, which was, however, of little use to him, and was set down by her more able-minded relatives as a proof of her imbecility.

If he could be said to have a champion it was Ruth, though she had learnt by experience to conceal, for his own sake, the affection with which she regarded him. When they were

children together she had often flamed up in generous indigation at the harshness with which the boy was treated. Only a year or two ago, indeed, she had spoken some very bitter words to her uncle on the subject, which had done the object of her compassion far more harm than good; but she had now schooled herself to hold her tongue about him, though at times she was near biting it through in keeping that enforced silence.

The knowledge of the girl's sympathy, though he knew but the tenth part of it, was very welcome to the young fellow; and his mother's love, though she never dared to reveal it save when they were alone, compensated him for much; but what made life at the Hall less intolerable to him, and the thoughts of his approaching exile more hateful than aught else, was the neighbourhood of Kate Salesby. Only one person, save herself, was cognisant of this fact—and it was not Mrs. Merridew. That the lad should think of falling in love was too monstrous a piece of impertinence to be suspected by the higher powers at the Hall: if he was not well content with having a roof over his head, and a "meat tea" every day, and clothing after a fashion (though a good deal after *the* fashion), he must have been an ingrate indeed; the only object of his ambition ought by rights to be to relieve his grandfather of the expense he was

putting him to, and to earn his own living as soon as possible, no matter in how remote a portion of the globe. That he had objects of interest of his own, in literature and the like, was unknown to them, and would not have been understood if it had been known. At the best it would only have excited some scornful merriment. Neither his uncle nor his aunt would have murdered Lorry in cold blood, but a very little extra provocation would have probably inclined them to do so, if the crime could have been committed with perfect impunity—a condition of affairs that exists in disunited families much oftener than is supposed. Superficial Christianity, the glaze of civilisation, and above all the fear of punishment, keep hate and cruelty among us within certain bounds, but the savage is indigenous here as in Terra del Fuego.

It has been cynically observed that the worm will not turn if you tread upon him hard enough, but this depends upon the nature of the worm; in some of that species there is a great deal of vitality. No one in possession of the facts could accuse Uncle Robert and Aunt Jane of too much tenderness in this respect; they had not treated their worm, as Izaak Walton did, "as if they loved him"; they had put their heels on him so hard, and with such persistency, that it was a wonder that there was even a wriggle left in him—but there *was* a wriggle. The cause of

this, which they were far indeed from suspecting, was that much as their victim hated them, he despised them more. It was curious, but though subject to such a persistent persecution as might well have given their victim a conviction of their superiority, Lawrence Merridew knew himself to be a head and shoulders above both of them, and was conscious of a sense of power, which, though ludicrous enough under the circumstances, enabled him to suffer and still be strong. For one of his years he had what is termed "the literary gift" in a marked degree, and what sometimes, though not always, accompanies it, a confidence in himself, which though often confounded with conceit, and indeed is *called* "confounded conceit," is something quite different from it. However contemptible, indeed, it may seem to others, to the possessor it is priceless. Sensitive as his organisation may be, and generally is, it enables him—while it lasts—to face the whips and scorns of the world in quite a surprising manner, as though it were some patent invention for hardening it, and makes his satin skin almost pachydermatous.

The worst disadvantage at which Lawrence Merridew was placed was that hitherto he had no one to sympathise with his literary aspirations; the two who loved him were unable to do so, and perceiving this he had shrunk from seeking sympathy. Help was coming to him in

this matter, though as yet he knew it not, and in other matters also, though these, too, were beyond his ken. He felt, indeed, that Sir Charles Walden was friendly inclined towards him; but he little guessed how favourable was the impression that his looks and manners, and especially the reckless frankness with which he had spoken of his own position, had made upon his new acquaintance.

CHAPTER VI.

INTRODUCTIONS.

Even to the eyes of its present visitor, well accustomed to the dwellings of the great, everything at Hillsland Hall was upon a large scale, and astonished him by its unnecessary magnitude. "It is like the Pyramids," was the baronet's mental reflection, "much too big for burying people in, even though as in this case they are alive." The mansion, indeed, was anything but homelike, and suggested a mausoleum, while its tenants struck him as being possessed of very little vitality. The Hall was enormous, and could have held half the county; and the drawing-room was of similar dimensions to that of a London club, but very differently furnished. Besides being crowded with every description of arm-chair and ottoman, it was full of Eastern knick-knacks, inlaid tables, screens of marvellous delicacy, and boxes of exquisite workmanship, from which emanated odours that made you faint. There were temples of ivory, not much

smaller than their originals, and ivory chessmen almost the size of real men. While Sir Charles was regarding these things with approving looks, he was saying to himself—

"It looks like a blessed bazaar in which everything is for sale, and for not one single article would I give sixpence, except for these chessmen."

His host, in evening apparel, but still with his black cap on, was explaining how he had won the men from the Rajah of Radenpoor at the game itself.

"And what did you stake on your side?"

"I think it was 10,000 rupees," returned the old gentleman loftily. "The Rajah was annoyed, of course, but, as he often played at chess with real men, on the squares of his audience chamber, and had plenty of them, I felt that I was not depriving him of his amusement."

Sir Charles regarded his host with the admiration due to a first-class liar. "It must have been a very interesting contest," he murmured.

"Life in India is interesting to those who deal with it on a large scale," returned the ex-Commissioner. "Things in England appear dwarfed by comparison."

Here Miss Jane entered the room, who was certainly not one of the things. She was almost as tall, though much more spare than her brother Robert; she had a habit of sniffing disapproval

at everything, and was unable to refrain from doing so now at Sir Charles, but he fortunately set it down to the sandal wood and other scents with which the atmosphere was laden. He had already been introduced to her, but not, of course, in her evening costume, which accentuated what was amiss with her, as it always does with scraggy women. She looked like a lay figure such as artists use, very angular and awkward; but her face, notwithstanding her thin lips, and eyes of pale blue, had plenty of unpleasant expression in it.

"Your father has been showing me his beautiful chessmen," said Sir Charles; "they fill me with envy."

"I suppose they are very fine," she replied; "considering what they cost they ought to be."

The situation was a little embarrassing, till the ex-Commissioner had explained in a low tone and with a significant smile that the true history of the transaction had been unrevealed to his offspring, lest they should imagine their parent had had gambling proclivities.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "though it was not worth while to trouble you with it, the whole affair had a diplomatic origin. In dealing with native princes—— But here is Ruth; you remember meeting my granddaughter at the bazaar the other day."

"Having once seen Miss Ruth Stratton it is

not likely that one should forget her," said Sir Charles, with a grave bow; the compliment was robbed of its artificiality by the earnest and respectful tone in which it was pronounced; and indeed it was a statement that did not admit of cavil. It was difficult to imagine a more beautiful creature than the young girl, whose hand he just touched with his own as though it had been something sacred. Young as she was, she was both tall and shapely; her eyes like the dark blue violet; her hair of that blue-black tinge that is almost always coarse, but which in her case was finer than silk; her complexion dark yet delicate; her movements graceful as the fawn; but the chief charm of her lay in the expression of her thoughtful face. This was not by any means of that emotional kind, of which we say, "it is the index of the soul"; it might perhaps have been so at one time; but few as were her years she had had no little experience of life, and she did not wear her heart upon her sleeve, because it may be she had some knowledge of daws and their habits; if she had been a man, one would have said she had a searching look.

Sir Charles's compliment did not embarrass her in the least; she smiled sweetly, indeed, for she could not smile otherwise, but it was a smile of the merest acknowledgment: it was a pretty speech enough, she seemed to be thinking to herself, but absolutely of no value. The speaker,

it was clear, had not advanced himself in her regard by uttering it by a hair's-breadth.

On every other member of the household he had marked the impression produced by his own greatness; even the Lord High Commissioner (as he had already termed him in his own mind) had been careful to let him see that he felt the honour of his visit. Mr. Robert's manner of receiving him had been fulsome; Miss Jane had shown her teeth, in a way altogether unusual with her, in effusive welcome; but Ruth treated him exactly like every other gentleman whom she had seen but once, save for the slight *soupçon* of familiarity that was due to a guest. She talked of the bazaar at which they had met, of its people and its prices, with a certain insistence of reminiscence, as though to remind him that that was the only common ground between them; she was exceedingly at her ease in the Zion of his position. Many men in his place would have credited her with an affectation of simplicity; but this man set her manner down to its true cause at once. Her mind was too full of really serious matters—only too probably, unpleasant ones—to take much heed of him, or of what he said.

This was not complimentary, of course, but there were plenty of compliments for him elsewhere. Mr. Robert presently entered the room with his wife leaning on his arm, and a little "got up" speech of how for this occasion only

she had thrown off her invalid habits to bid him welcome to Hillsland Hall. She was a washed-out little woman, with that sort of die-away air that is promising to nobody but a lady's doctor. Sir Charles, who had a talent for "ticketing" people—assigning them to the genus to which they belonged—perceived in her at once the professional invalid. "In the daytime," he reflected, "that woman will have a red nose." And his diagnosis was correct. Mrs. Robert was really in delicate health, but—like many women who have other means of subsistence—she traded upon it. Poor people never do this, because they know they will find no customers, but a sick heiress is always interesting to a certain class of her fellow-creatures. Mrs. Robert, however, was far from interesting to her present guest, though to look at him you would have thought him sympathetic to his finger-tips. Perhaps he took a cynical pleasure in answering the Artificial according to their artificiality, or perhaps it seemed to him the easiest mode of treating their disorder, but certainly his host had entertained a needless apprehension when he had expressed his fear that his daughter-in-law might bore Sir Charles with her complaints. In five minutes she and the guest of the evening were discussing remedies for neuralgia with an earnestness little short of enthusiasm.

This conduct on Sir Charles's part was very

pleasing to Mr. Robert (though he had his doubts of its genuineness), inasmuch as it corroborated the view he had taken of his wife's social attractions. What especially gratified him was that the baronet's manner on being introduced to Mrs. Merridew, though perfectly courteous, had certainly less warmth in it, as though to mark his sense of Mrs. Robert being mistress of the house. This was even a greater victory than Robert imagined, for not only was the widow his wife's superior in appearance and address, but her sad sweet face was beaming with a gentle gratitude to the baronet for the interest which, as she had heard a few hours ago, he had manifested in her son. He recognised it at once, but without the least acknowledgment for it in tone or feature, and the gracious coldness with which he received her extinguished in a moment the little glimmer of hope she had entertained of her poor Lorry having found a friend.

It was from his mother that the lad had inherited his good looks, though not his intelligence, nor even that air of high breeding which clung to him in spite of his patched clothes; she was still a very handsome woman, but "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought" that did not, as it often does, enhance her comeliness. It was no intellectual struggle, but the hopeless contest with circumstance that had ploughed those lines of care upon her kindly face. She had been

"forgiven" by her family for the unfortunate marriage which they had done their best to promote, but only to find herself in a state of slavery. Her father was indifferent to her; her brother and sister Jane were her tyrants; and her boy was friendless and penniless. It was amazing how she could smile at all, but on an occasion of this kind, as she only too well understood, she was bound to smile. Lawrence had told her, with the exaggeration of youth, of their visitor's goodwill towards him; how his frankness had led him to confide to him his miserable circumstances. And she had looked for some sign, even perhaps for a clasp of the hand, from this rich and powerful man to assure her of the interest he felt in Lorry. It was, of course, an absurd expectation; but when they have no ground for hope the wretched often entertain hopes without ground. It seemed possible to her, that being himself placed so far above fear or favour, Sir Charles might have shown himself friendly to her. But no sign was shown.

He exhibited rather more than less of courtesy in his reception of the Rev. Arthur Grueby, who made up their company, than in her own case. The Vicar of Hillsland, it was true, was known to him, but such knowledge could hardly have been a passport to his favour; a civil recognition was the most he could have been led to

expect, whereas Sir Charles's manner was distinctly gracious. The man was a clergyman indeed, but far from a credit to his cloth. On one occasion the parish had been deprived of his spiritual services for the space of three years, the living during that period, as Sir Charles himself was said to have remarked, being "not only sequestered but sequestrated." He knew all about Mr. Grueby, and, to say truth, was by no means flattered at finding him his fellow-guest. Something of this, as we know, his host had foreseen, though from his long absence abroad, he knew much less of Mr. Grueby than his neighbours; but Mr. Robert had a large charity for sinners who were of use to him, and he had found the vicar useful in many ways; they had tastes in common, one of which was a passion for the race-course, and were pronounced by the parish with more truth than elegance to be as "thick as thieves."

It was possible that Mr. Grueby had "made a point" with his friend of being asked to meet the baronet on the present occasion; and if so, there were reasons why he should have been gratified. It was probable, too, that Mr. Robert conceived Sir Charles to be in too high a position to care what guests—since they must all be his inferiors—were asked to meet him; or even that since he had got into scrapes himself he might have a fellow-feeling for another in the like posi-

tion, but in that case he had made a great mistake. The *bon vivant* who after too splendid a repast takes more château margaux than is good for him has very little in common with the wretch who gorges himself with tripe and washes it down with too much gin punch. Sir Charles, as we know, had much better reasons for feeling unfavourably disposed towards Mr. Robert Stratton, but it is doubtful whether any of these was so strong and vigorous as that which seized him when he found that he had been asked to Hillsland Hall to meet the Rev. Arthur Grueby.

CHAPTER VII.

AT THE DINNER TABLE.

The dining-room at Hillsland Hall was on the same gigantic scale as the drawing-room, with which it communicated—or rather was cut off from—by two pairs of folding-doors. It was plainly furnished, but boasted of a horse-shoe table, such as is now seldom seen out of a college combination-room. Art in these days has opposed itself to it, but there is nothing to be compared with it for comfort and even for appearance, especially in winter-time. Whatever the season, a fire was always burning in the grate when the host was present, and a pleasant light, through the glass screen in front of it, it cast upon the glass and silver. For the business of dinner the "horse-shoe" has no rival; the genial flame, deprived of its scorching powers by the crystal barrier, is the only *vis-à-vis*, and your "duty" is absolutely restricted to your neighbour on either side of you.

Sir Charles, between Mrs. Robert and Mrs. Merridew, especially congratulated himself on being opposite to nobody, and free to converse as he pleased without observation from over the way. If Ruth, indeed, had been there instead of the screen, the arrangement would have been still more satisfactory; but he much preferred the fire to any other face that could have been substituted for it, and especially to the monkey features and shifty smile of Mr. Arthur Grueby. "No one can help his looks" is a well-known saying, but contains only a half truth; one of the best men I have ever known was also the ugliest, but his expression not only redeemed him (if you had the sense to read it), but put him almost on a level with the angels. The Vicar of Hillsland could not change his hue, which was tropical, nor add a cubit to his stature, which was but little over five feet, but that look of shiftiness in his eyes and mouth, alternating, on occasions of self-confidence, with a certain vulgar cunning, was something for which he was certainly indebted to second nature rather than her predecessor.

The baronet, who had taken Mrs. Robert into dinner, was for some time exceedingly attentive to her; he found himself, not without some amusement, discussing with her homœopathy and the massage system, with an occasional excursion into mesmerism. She narrated her

symptoms with much frankness, and as a remedy for some imaginary disorders which, not to be behindhand with his fair but frail companion, he invented on the spur of the moment, she earnestly recommended him to try electricity. On his part, he gravely suggested mud baths, the consideration of which, in connection with the soil of the neighbourhood, took such strong possession of her mind, always in search of new remedial agents, that he felt he could leave her for the present to the contemplation of it. Then he addressed himself in a more cheerful but lower tone to his other neighbour.

"How is it that my young friend Lawrence is not with us to-night?"

Mrs. Merridew, as he had not failed to notice, had hardly touched bit or sup, and it was fortunate, perhaps, that knife and fork were not in her hands when he addressed her, or they might have fallen from them, so moved was she by that simple question.

"He is not here; he is never here," she answered hurriedly, "he is not permitted to mingle with his——" she hesitated for a moment for a word, and then, with a little touch of scorn, altogether foreign to her character, added, "his betters."

"Indeed?" observed Sir Charles, with an air of curiosity. "Is it as regards moral character, or personal appearance, or charm of manner, that

he is considered the inferior of our friend the divine, yonder?"

"Do you mean the vicar?" asked the widow, with simplicity.

"Well, the word, I must confess, did not describe him with accuracy; yes, I meant Grueby; he is a clergyman, you know."

"He is not very good friends with my poor Lawrence," said Mrs. Merridew, whose mind was wont to occupy itself with one subject at a time, and lost itself if led astray from it. "His position gives him opportunities——"

"Preaches against him from the pulpit, does he?" interrupted Sir Charles, laughing softly.

"Well, he did say something once, at Robert's instigation, about Lawrence's opinions; it seemed hard that one so young should be held up as it were to the disapproval of a whole congregration. Mr. Percy, of Binstead, thinks quite differently of Lorry."

"Well, well, Percy is a Christian and a gentleman, and we must make allowances for those who are neither," returned the baronet with charitable unction. "Perhaps you do not know, Mrs. Merridew, that your boy's father and I were in the same regiment together?"

"I knew it very well, Sir Charles, but since you didn't allude to it, it was not for me——" She stopped, then added in broken tones, "All those days are past and gone."

It was easy to see that they were. There had been a time, her neighbour remembered, when Colonel Merridew, of the Guards, was a personage in London, and the worn and weary, but still comely woman beside him, a toast. The colonel had soon come to the end of his tether, which, as has been said, had included his wife's money as well as his own, but his downward career had been brilliant as that of a comet.

"There is something in your boy that reminds me of his father," said Sir Charles musingly, and purposely ignoring his companion's emotion; "he is frank and high-spirited, and even under very serious difficulties keeps his light heart."

"And then Lorry is so clever," murmured the widow earnestly, "he writes such beautiful poetry, and stories, and things." For the moment, in her maternal enthusiasm, she had forgotten she was a domestic nobody talking of a penniless boy.

"What is Mrs. Merridew so eloquent about, Sir Charles?" inquired Mrs. Robert in her thin invalid tone, with a squeeze of lemon in it. "One cannot get in a word edgeways."

The widow turned pale with terror; if Sir Charles should reveal the subject of their conversation, she was lost indeed.

"I am afraid it was my fault, Mrs. Robert," he replied, dropping his voice to a whisper, "I

was so indiscreet as to venture on the topic of old times."

"And that, no doubt, unsealed the fountain of reminiscence," she answered laughing, "poor Mrs. Merridew is a little weak on that subject, and those who know her are careful to avoid it."

"She has a son, has she not?" inquired Sir Charles indifferently.

"Oh, yes. It is wonderful she has not talked to you about him. He lives with us, you know, though he is soon going to Seringapatam —no, it is Singapore, by-the-bye—where his grandfather has obtained him a situation."

"Then he is almost grown up, I suppose—indeed, I now recollect having seen him at the bazaar the other day."

"It is very good of you to remember him. I really know nothing against him, but I am afraid—at least my husband tells me he has no great hopes of him."

"A *mauvais sujet?*"

"I should not like to say that; but he has thrown away his opportunities at school and so on."

"Perhaps the poor boy is stupid."

"No; he is not exactly that; he has even talents of a certain kind, I believe, but—if you are wondering that you do not see him here——"

"Not at all," interrupted Sir Charles, "I feel sure there must be some good reason."

"Well, Robert thinks—and he generally knows best, I find—that Lawrence—his name is Lawrence—is not quite—I dare hardly whisper it, lest Mrs. M——, poor thing, should hear me, and we know what a mother always thinks of her boy——"

Sir Charles nodded adhesion; his maternal instincts were at least as strong, he said to himself, as Mrs. Robert's.

"Well, Robert doesn't think the boy quite gentlemanlike."

"Dear, dear." Sir Charles clucked regret with his tongue, an operation which, combined with the thought of Robert Stratton being a judge of gentlemanliness, almost suffocated him. "That's bad; because his father was certainly one."

"So I have heard," said Mrs. Robert frigidly, "but he was also a gambler."

"Does Lawrence gamble?"

"Well, he has nothing to gamble with," returned the lady naïvely; "but Robert says he is reckless."

"I am sorry," said Sir Charles gravely. "I should like to have seen him, for the sake of old times; but I don't want to be corrupted."

"Oh, he won't do that, I'm sure," she answered encouragingly. "The poor lad is nobody's enemy but his own. If you would really like to see something of him, I'll speak to Robert."

"Thanks. Not that it much matters—you are not going, I do hope."

"Yes, Robert has coughed; we have our little signals. His father wants to smoke. You will not forget the electric belt."

"No, no, nor you the mud baths. The subject is at all events worth inquiry. I should think Mr. Grueby would know about them—I mean as to the soil of the parish."

The two parted on the best of terms. Mrs. Robert, who had intended to go to bed after dinner utterly exhausted by her "effort" to entertain the guest of the evening, thought she might even see him again in the drawing-room. She *had* "entertained" him exceedingly.

She had also afforded him a character study of some interest. He had come to the conclusion —and it was a just one—that she was much more weak than wicked. She had certainly exhibited a little jealousy of Mrs. Merridew, but that lady had a son, whereas she was childless: nor did her account of Lawrence seem the result of any personal malevolence; she had evidently no knowledge of the young fellow save what was imparted to her by her husband, of whom she had unwittingly given even a worse impression to her late neighbour than he had formed before. The time, however, had come, now the ladies had withdrawn, when it was necessary to show himself friendly to that gentleman, as well as to

his host and fellow-guest. It was not a difficult operation, for Sir Charles Walden could be all things to all men, and would have been equally at home in the House of Convocation or in a thieves' kitchen; but it was a very disagreeable one, for notwithstanding his many-sidedness, he was one of the most fastidious of men. Moreover, if you had asked him why he was about to take any pains in such a matter, he would have been puzzled to answer the question. At his age he could hardly be termed "a creature of impulse," but his character remained as much a riddle to himself as to other people.

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN THE LADIES HAD WITHDRAWN.

"I HOPE, Sir Charles, you have found your dinner to your liking," observed his host when the cloth had been removed and revealed the depths of the mahogany table, and the curved line of a little railway on which the decanters ran on silver wheels. "We rather pride ourselves on our curries."

"Curries, sir," exclaimed the baronet enthusiastically, "the banquet was worthy of a Beauvilliers. You pro-consuls of the present day, it seems, rival those of old Rome in the splendour of your entertainments."

The ex-Commissioner smiled like one conscious of merit, but who has no objection to its being recognised. Mr. Robert endeavoured to look like a Prince of the Blood, when the Queen's health is being drunk; though not immediately concerned in the matter, it reflected credit upon him. Mr. Grueby, perceiving a compliment had been paid to his host, though the allusion to the

pro-consul was beyond him, exclaimed "Hear, hear," and emptied his glass of madeira, as though he was doing honour to a toast, then added, in a loud aside to his fellow-guest, "For my part I can't think how he does it."

It was not a very judicious remark, since it seemed to imply a want of visible means in his entertainer of providing a good dinner, and it met with no outward sympathy from the person addressed, though his very heartstrings were tickled by it. The face of the host as he pulled stertorously at his narghile, which had already been supplied to him, and glared at the little divine, was a study; nor was Mr. Robert's countenance without the traces of annoyance. He could already hear his father's "What do you think of your vicar *now?*" a question which was sure to be put to him the next morning. It seemed probable there might be other reasons for the same inquiry; for Mr. Grueby, who had paid much attention to the champagne during the repast, now constituted himself a permanent official on the bottle railway, taking good care the line should not be blocked, while at the same time he never failed to stop the train at his own station. The two golden rules for drinking—"Drink slow" and "Don't mix your liquors"—he recklessly ignored, and would probably have paid as little heed to the third, "Never sit with your back to the fire," had not the

horse-shoe table made such an imprudence impossible.

Though the company was small in number, their characters were various. Sir Charles was a man apart, but at the same time capable of conversing on any topic, and with the air of one to whom it was familiar. The parson, naturally garrulous and egotistic, was rendered more so by the generous wines, which, as he observed with justice, and a movement of the eye designed to be intelligent, was "such a tipple as you didn't get every work-a-day, nor even Sundays." Mr. Robert, though chiefly occupied in restraining his friend's loquacity, had a mind full of serious (though far from religious) matters. The host, taciturn on all other subjects, was eloquent, between his puffs of tobacco, upon the affairs of British India, in which the baronet courteously affected a keen interest. He did not talk of elephants and tigers, but discussed the more important, if less entertaining topics of the future of our Eastern possessions, not without a delicate suggestion now and then, that it would have given better promise if his own commissionership had been prolonged. What mortal man could effect for the benefit of toiling millions of our fellow-creatures and our fellow-subjects, though with dusky skins, in a quarter of a century, by forethought and assiduity (with, perhaps, some little natural genius for administration), he might

say he had done; but, after all, he felt that his work was but a broken column. The ridiculous system of superannuation had cut short his usefulness. In the matter of irrigation, for instance, the irrigated area in his province had been increased.

Here Mr. Grueby illustrated the subject under discussion by upsetting a bottle of sherry, and irrigating the horse-shoe table with its contents.

"Ring the bell," roared the ex-Commissioner. If the servant had been a native and had answered with Eastern promptitude his master would probably have ordered him to remove the vicar, for, as an administrator of justice on a large scale, his temper was exceedingly short; but there was, fortunately, some little delay which gave time for reflection, and an opportunity for apology on the part of the vicar. "Very sorry," he was heard to murmur, "points got wrong somehow on the railway."

"Fortunately," said Sir Charles, with his ready smile, "it was only a goods train, and there has been no loss of life."

The ex-Commissioner, save for muttered ejaculations of wrath which alternated with the hubble-bubble of his pipe, was, however, silenced for the evening; the great gun from which a good deal more might have been expected, and would, indeed, undoubtedly have come, was,

so to speak, spiked, and the baronet felt some gratitude towards the divine in consequence. It now, however, became necessary to talk to the vicar, Mr. Robert being openly occupied, though his efforts were carried on in whispers, in assuaging his father's indignation. The position, which would have been embarrassing to most persons in his place, afforded genuine pleasure to the guest of the evening. It seemed to him that he had not had such fun for many a day as he was enjoying at "the Warren," as he called it. Every inmate of the house had excited in him either interest or amusement, and though he had taken care to leave the date of his departure open (a precaution he never neglected), he felt in no hurry to return to the solitude of Hurlby.

"And what is your tip for the Derby?" he inquired of Mr. Grueby, with the air of a neophyte addressing the very fountain of information.

"Ah, that's tellings, Sir Charles," returned the other, not only with his usual wink of superhuman cunning, but even with a slight projection of his tongue. "We know what we know, don't we, Mr. Robert?"

"I know nothing at all about it," returned that gentleman curtly; just at that moment he was far from inclined to encourage or even

acknowledge the familiarity that existed between himself and his clerical friend.

"Quite right, mum's the word," returned the other with a chuckle.

Mum *had* been the word, with Mr. Grueby, while dinner was going on, but port and madeira had also since played their parts with him, and placed him in a position tolerably elevated, from which he was not likely to be moved by satire or snubbing. Though by no means drunk, he had been rendered after a fashion genial, and wholly oblivious of social superiority. He would have called Sir Charles, Walden, only he had forgotten his name.

"Well," he said, "not to be unsociable, I will tell you what Salesby thinks of the first favourite, and you must admit he is a good judge. You won't go far wrong if you go by Salesby."

"Still, I have heard Mr. Salesby has been unfortunate in his racing speculations," observed the baronet, smiling.

"Well, that is so; I said you would not go far wrong in following his advice, but I did not say you would be right. He is the kind of man that always backs the second horse. He's wonderfully keen upon it still, poor devil; 'I should like to live to see my son ride the winner of the Derby,' he was only saying the other day."

"But I thought he had no son."

"Nor has he; that's the joke of it. Twenty years ago he might have said 'I hope to live to own a Derby winner'; but he has gone down several pegs since then."

"It is fortunate, poor fellow, then, that he is childless."

"Nay, but he isn't. That shows *you* have not been at Hillsland, Sir Charles, for a year or two, or you would have found out, I warrant, that Dick's daughter has grown to be the prettiest girl—well, save one who shall be nameless—in the whole parish. A brown girl, with very good eyes, and who knows how to use them; 'she's backit like a peacock, she's breastit like the swan'; you know the style; only Kitty has a tongue of her own that flicks you like a whip."

"Then that was Miss Kitty," reflected Sir Charles, "who was using her eyes with such effect on Master Lawrence in the orchard this afternoon. I admire his taste and also hers, for it's clear her tongue has flicked the parson."

"But you have suffered this young lady to run away with you, Mr. Grueby," he observed, "which, indeed, is not to be wondered at from what you tell me of her charms, and have not answered my question about the Derby."

"Oh, Salesby thinks that those who have put their money on Ganymede will lose it."

"But you, it seems, have better and more private information on that matter."

"Well, perhaps we have," and the vicar looked with triumphant sagacity towards Mr. Robert; that gentleman's face, however, might have been carved in stone for any response it gave him. "I'm sorry to seem grumpy, but a secret—and especially a secret of the stable—is worth nothing when it's told."

"Do you suppose," inquired Mr. Robert in icy tones, "that the three to one in half-crowns you may have taken upon the event in question is likely to excite the cupidity of Sir Charles Walden?"

"Oh, come, I like that," returned the vicar, stung by his friend's contemptuous tone; "half-crowns, indeed. And now you've mentioned the odds he has only got to look at the paper and you've told him."

"I give you my honour, Mr. Grueby," observed Sir Charles, with great gravity, "that I will take no advantage of the indiscretion."

"Enough said between gentlemen," returned the vicar effusively. "A glass of wine with you, Sir Charles."

This operation was effected with great solemnity, while the ex-Commissioner in speech-

less indignation pushed his velvet cap up so far on the back of his head that it seemed to hang there by mere capillary attraction, and Mr. Robert stabbed a pear with his silver knife with murderous vehemence.

"And how are the mines going on up Hillsland way?" inquired Sir Charles, breaking an embarrassing silence; "in my part of the world they seem to be showing signs of recovery."

For the first time the continuity of the speaker's usual success was broken; he had, hitherto, said nothing which was not acceptable, and as his wont (when it pleased him to be gracious) in his most gracious manner, but to speak of mines at Hillsland Hall was like talking of a rope in the house of a man whose son has been hanged. In this case, it was only a son-in-law, but the shaft, as it might well be called, went home. Aunt Jerry's husband—Mr. Jeremiah Lock—had sunk in shafts about one hundred thousand pounds. The baronet's question had been addressed to the host, and Mr. Robert, no doubt to save his father from an unpleasant topic, had opened his mouth to reply to it; for some reason, however, best known to himself, he shut it, without permitting one word to escape, and with his eyes fixed on his plate waited for the old gentleman's rejoinder.

"I know—er—very little—er—about mines," he answered, while the hubble-bubble of the narghile made itself very distinctly heard, a sign, as one of the party at least knew, of suppressed emotion; "but, from what I hear—er—there is more activity in that branch of speculation."

"Activity is just the word for them," replied the baronet smiling; "they always remind me of volcanoes, not only from the devastation they cause, but from their periods of eruption and quiescence. They make such a sensation when they are prospering, and are so very quiet when the lode gives out. There is nothing in nature looks so dead as a worked-out mine."

"When they *are* dead, however, they still make 'calls,'" observed the vicar ruefully. It was clear that Mr. Grueby had dropped his half-crowns in other places besides the race-course.

"There are exceptions, however," remarked Sir Charles with cheerfulness. "I hear the Common Wheal mine, for example, which we all thought dead, has come to life again, and the old shareholders are getting cent. per cent. for what they thought was lost money."

"I read something to that effect in the paper the other day," returned Mr. Robert indifferently. "If you have finished your cigar, Sir Charles,

we will join the ladies." The host himself did not join them, but pleading fatigue and the privilege of old age, retired to his sanctum, muttering execrations on the vicar in the Hindustani tongue, and followed by his body servant with the narghile.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE DRAWING-ROOM.

When the gentlemen entered the drawing-room, they found the ladies at nearly as great a distance from one another as cattle who are not on good terms upon a common. Mrs. Robert almost prostrate on a sofa, recruiting her exhausted energies; Miss Jane superhumanly upright on a music stool in front of the piano; Mrs. Merridew at a tambour frame, at which she was gazing thoughtfully but doing not one stroke of work; and Ruth with a book in her hand, occupying one-half of a conversation chair. At the gentlemen's appearance the whole party became endowed with vitality, as though it were some automatic instrument, in which, when you put a penny in the slot, the instrument begins to work. Mrs. Robert sat up and feebly smiled; Miss Jane struck a few notes on the piano; Mrs. Merridew began to make moss roses with floss silk; and Ruth rose from her chair.

"Pray do not let me disturb you," said

Sir Charles to her; "what a charming chair! Should I drive you away, if I were to try it?"

The girl hesitated for a moment, and then resumed her seat.

"No, indeed," she answered gently, but with a touch of coldness, "why should you?"

"Well, the fact is we have all been misbehaving ourselves," he replied smiling, "smoking cigars. I feel as if I ought to change my coat before coming near a lady."

"We are all used to the smell of smoke in this house."

For so young a girl, she struck him as marvellously unembarrassed; there was not a trace of shyness about her, but still less of forwardness or flirtation. When he had entered the room, he thought she had had some purpose in having chosen the conversation chair.

"Vainly," he had said to himself, "is the snare spread in sight of the bird." This was not from vanity, though he had a pretty high opinion of himself, but the result of experience. So many nets had been spread for him in his time by the female fowler; but now he felt he had been mistaken. The chair, if there was any design in its choice, had, he was convinced, been chosen for her. Her manner, if not absolutely hostile to him, was not encouraging; it was cold and indifferent; and she was surely too young to affect indifference with the object of attracting

him. Nevertheless it had that effect. It piqued him. She had undeniable attractions of her own, too, of which the conversation chair gave him excellent opportunities of judging.

A more beautiful girl, he was compelled to acknowledge, as they sat at ease opposite to one another, not too close to be embarrassing yet near enough for minute observation, he had never seen. Without the least touch of haughtiness, she wore an air of singular independence and self-reliance; it was evident that he had by no means made that impression on her which he was accustomed to make on women far her seniors. She was comparatively alone with him; Mr. Robert was apparently saying something sympathising to his invalid spouse; Mr. Grueby was turning over the leaves of Miss Jane's music book, and beating time, as well he might, for it was all wrong and deserved it, with unsteady hands; and Mrs. Merridew was busy with her moss roses. The pair in the conversation chair were isolated, but Ruth sat perfectly at her ease, with her finger keeping the place in her book, as though she were at least as ready to resume her reading as for conversation.

"May I ask what is the subject of your studies?" Sir Charles inquired.

"I was reading Shelley's 'Revolt of Islam.'"

"A beautiful poem," he observed, "but rather unintelligible. Do you not find it so?"

"Now and then I require it to be explained to me."

"You are fortunate in finding an expounder."

For the first time the colour came into her face, enhancing what had seemed perfection.

"Yes; I am afraid I am not very poetical. Shelley puzzles me, where, I am told, he ought not to do so. For instance, there is his 'Cloud.' I feel how beautiful it is, but the meaning is in places obscure to me."

"I have found that too, and hitherto it has vexed me; now I shall be pleased because I shall know I have your sympathy."

"I should think it would be more satisfactory," she replied coldly, "to get the poem explained."

He felt that she resented his compliment, and, indeed, some men might have considered themselves snubbed, but to Sir Charles Walden such a conviction was impossible; he drew from his pocket a gold pencil case and a dainty little ivory tablet.

"Then you will not refuse," he said, "to kindly oblige me with the name and address of your instructor."

She could not but smile at his pretence of earnestness, but again a flush mantled to her forehead, "It is my cousin Lawrence," she said, "who smooths my Shelley difficulties, he is very fond of poetry."

"Indeed!" the other answered with a pleasant smile. "I dare say now he writes poetry himself?"

"He does, and very well," she answered gravely; then added hastily, "not that I am any judge of such matters, and besides, I have no right to say a word about it."

"I wonder whether she has or not?" thought Sir Charles to himself. "It is almost certain that these two young people have fallen in love with one another. What else have they to do in this house, with such surroundings? Upon my life, Master Lorry, you are not so much to be pitied after all."

"You need not be afraid of my telling tales out of school, my dear young lady," he replied in the gentlest tone, "for your cousin is a friend of mine."

It was the one advantage which his superiority in years gave him that he could use that phrase, "my dear young lady," without impertinence; but it was not altogether to his satisfaction that she seemed to take it as a matter of course; what was quite as probable, she might not, however, have noticed it, her mind being occupied with another subject—and *that* was not a consoling reflection to him either.

"Yes," she said, with the first approach she had shown to animation, "Lawrence told me that you had been kind to him."

"I have every desire to be so," returned Sir Charles softly, "but I have had no opportunity of showing him kindness. I could not help being pleased with such an engaging young fellow; who could?"

"A good many people can," she answered bitterly. "Even if you were but civil to him, it was a new experience; civility is a thing he is not accustomed to." The speaker's eyes glittered, but not with tears; she clenched her fingers, and pressed her lips together, as if to suppress an outburst of indignation.

"And yet your cousin seems to me so bright and genial and willing to please," observed Sir Charles, with a surprised air. "Of course good looks go some way with one, even with one's own sex, but his manner is as pleasant as his face."

He had no fault to find with her immobility now; the girl's cheeks were flushed with pleasure, her mouth wore a grateful smile; her very bosom heaved with sympathetic emotion.

"You agree with me, I see," he continued, "which shows I have judged him aright. Now what makes people—I mean the people you speak of—treat him——"

"Like a dog," she put in suddenly; "that is how they treat him. He has his faults, of course, poor fellow; who has not? But if you ask me why they treat him so I cannot tell."

"The explanation is easy enough, my dear

young lady," he answered gently. "They feel that he is superior to them in natural endowments—spiritual, mental, and physical—and having the whiphand of him in material, though less important, matters, they like to make him feel his inferiority there. It is not generally understood, but it is nevertheless true, that a considerable section of mankind—and, alas! even of womankind—except that they have the attribute of envy, in which the quadruped is deficient——. But in a young lady's presence I must not express myself too strongly——"

"You are not doing that," she answered with suppressed agitation; "you do not know what he has to endure."

Sir Charles smiled to himself at this introduction of the personal pronoun into an abstract question.

"Well, I was about to say, as regards those who tyrannise over helpless and inoffensive persons, through jealousy and from the mere love of cruelty, there is in my opinion only one name for them: they are brutes."

He saw by her face that he had found a way to her heart at last, though by a strange road.

"It seems to me," said Mr. Robert to his wife, "that Ruth is taking advantage of her opportunities. Sir Charles and she have already found some common ground of sympathy."

"It's Shelley, no doubt," returned the invalid contemptuously; she was by no means pleased that the guest of the evening had not sought the neighbourhood of her sofa instead of the conversation chair; she had evidently made a favourable impression on him, and he could have flirted with Ruth at any time, whereas, as he ought to have known, her nerves were not always equal to the mental strain of conversation. To-morrow, after such unusual excitement, she would probably be a wreck.

"I don't care whether it's Shelley or shellfish, if only the topic helps her on the way to Hurlby Castle," observed Mr. Robert, more bluntly—for Mr. Grueby's conduct was still rankling in his mind—than he was in the habit of speaking to his delicate consort.

"Robert, you shock me," returned the lady reproachfully. "How can Shelley—a pagan, I believe—ever form the groundwork of a union of hearts?"

"All marriages are not made where I venture to think ours was, Popsy," returned her husband gently.

"But in this case there is such a disparity of ages," she returned plaintively. "Ruth is so very young, that really I feel hardly justified in doing what little I have done to-night to encourage Sir Charles."

"Encourage! You have charmed him, my

dear, which is little to be wondered at; but you are far from having anything to reproach yourself with on that account. A husband is often all the more devoted for being his wife's senior. Why, you are younger than I am, for instance."

"Flatterer! It is only by a few months, you know."

"It seems years, to look at you, my precious; and, at all events, it is fortunate for some girls that they do not set their hearts only on those who are their contemporaries."

"To be sure, it would be deplorable if Lawrence and Ruth should fall in love with one another, would it not?" replied the lady pathetically.

"Lawrence? I should like to catch the fellow at it," returned the other, with scornful vehemence.

"He is uncommonly handsome," observed the lady, with feminine persistence.

Nobody could have said that of her husband at that moment. Praise of the helpless lad, seldom as he heard it, was wormwood to him; and in this case it was the more bitter because it proceeded from one whom it was unadvisable to contradict.

Miss Jane's song now came to a conclusion, and Mr. Robert clapped his hands applaudingly, but with an expression of face such as an Eastern

despot might wear when summoning his Chancellor of the Bowstring, and which did not escape Sir Charles's eye as he applauded likewise. To have a cigar with that man alone while under the necessity of being civil to him would, he reflected, be intolerable; and yet a cigar he must presently have. His little pleasures had all the force of duties with him.

"What does your uncle do with himself after dinner?" he inquired of Ruth abruptly.

"He generally goes to grandpapa's room."

"A filial duty," he replied approvingly. "Now since you tell me everyone smokes in this house, I conclude Lawrence smokes; would you mind asking him to let me be his companion for half an hour."

"Nothing would give him greater pleasure, I am sure," said Ruth; "his sitting-room is at least clean and airy, if it is not furnished with much splendour. I will tell him to call for you when you gentlemen retire."

"A good song, and very well sung, was it not, Sir Charles?" exclaimed Mr. Grueby.

"It was not only well, but charmingly sung," replied the baronet, rising and approaching the piano. "It is so long since I have been in the musical world, Miss Stratton, that my opinion is not worth much; but since I last heard professional singing of the highest class, there has been nothing that has given me so much pleasure."

Miss Jane's face grew red with pleasure—though not in the proper place; she was one of those women whose colour rises everywhere but on her cheeks.

"You are very good to say so, but I feel I am not in voice to-night."

She had really acquitted herself very well, and was quite aware of it; singing was the one accomplishment she possessed.

"Then I shall look forward to to-morrow night with eagerness," he answered, a reply not only flattering but politic, since it put a stop to further performances for the present. She closed the music book, and rose, and the other ladies followed her example. Sir Charles, as they bade him good-night, gave their hands a tender squeeze, which each translated after her own fashion; he smiled effusively on all, except Mrs. Merridew, whose hand, however, he pressed with particular significance. He had already learnt enough of the character of the company, to know that any favour shown to that unhappy lady would be turned to her disadvantage.

When the last petticoat had left the room, "Now let us enjoy ourselves," exclaimed Mr. Grueby hilariously; "Stratton has got the mellowest whiskey, Sir Charles, that ever you tasted."

"I never touch whiskey," returned the baronet with a cold smile, "and if our host will excuse me, I prefer to retire."

The vicar's jaw dropped, for he was by no means desirous of a *tête-à-tête* with his friend, wherein his conduct at table was likely to be criticised, but Sir Charles's tone admitted of no remonstrance. Mr. Robert accompanied his guest to his room—not an unnecessary courtesy in the labyrinth of Hillsland Hall—and left him there with effusive wishes for a good night's rest; repaid I am sorry to say, when the door had closed on his retreating person, by the muttered ejaculation, "Beast!"

CHAPTER X.

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN POETRY.

Sir Charles had but just exchanged his coat for a smoking jacket, and his evening shoes for slippers, when there was a light tap at his door, and Lawrence Merridew presented himself. He wore the same clothes he had had on when they had parted from one another on the hill; their patched and frayed condition were in such strong contrast to the other's gorgeous raiment, that it forced itself upon the visitor's eye, in spite of himself. And yet this lad was a son of the house, removed only by a generation from the man who had just been playing the host. The best instincts of the baronet's nature revolted against this unnatural discrepancy. On the other hand, the young fellow's face, as compared with his uncle's, was that of a Hyperion to a Satyr; good breeding and intelligence showed themselves in every line of it—though physically he could hardly be termed handsome, it was full of intellectual grace. Sir Charles had that

weakness for youth and good looks, which in men of his stamp does duty for pity and tenderness, and it intensified his just indignation.

"If you will come to my poor sitting-room," said the lad, "and bring your cigars with you, for I regret to say I have none to offer you, you will find it at least large and airy, and it will save you the discomfort of sleeping in a smoky atmosphere."

"Oh, as to that," returned the other smiling, "I am not very particular, and I am afraid that I am sometimes so lost to a sense of propriety as to smoke in bed. But I shall be glad of your companionship over the social weed, and gladly accept your offer of an asylum."

Lawrence nodded, and led the way through many a passage and corridor, and up stair after stair.

"Well, upon my life, it *is* a warren," exclaimed Sir Charles, as he toiled after his guide.

"Hush," returned the other, "there are ferrets about."

The seriousness of the young gentleman's tone no less than the appropriateness of the remark, upset the gravity of the visitor; he had some humour of his own, and a keen appreciation of it in others, but amusement of any kind was a rare luxury with him. He had passed the time when it can be purchased.

"Do you mean your uncle?" he inquired.

"Yes; he and that foulmart, the parson, have just gone into the smoking-room yonder. I heard the door shut."

Sir Charles, shaking with mirth, began to tread lightly as a truant schoolboy passing his master's door. He had enjoyed nothing so much as this clandestine adventure, with its *soupçon* of impropriety as regarded the laws of hospitality, for years.

"This is my den, Sir Charles," said the lad presently, ushering his companion into a large bare apartment furnished with three chairs, a deal table, and a bookcase obviously "knocked up" by the village carpenter. There were no curtains, and the moonlight without illumined it quite as much as the two tallow candles that flared and guttered on the table.

"There's plenty of room in it, at all events," observed his guest, seizing the sole opportunity for praise that presented itself, "and, by Jove, what a fine view you have from your windows."

"Yes, that is a luxury the value of which Aunt Jane does not understand, or she would doubtless have left me with a brick wall to look at," was the bitter reply.

"You must not say a word against Aunt Jane, please," said Sir Charles with mock gravity. "She has just been delighting me with her fine voice; she sang like a nightingale."

"I wish she had sung like a swan," was the

grim reply, "for then we should have heard the last of her."

Sir Charles, with his nose flattened against the window-pane, said nothing, but his shoulders shook.

"Here," he was thinking to himself, "is a *rara avis*, a satirist of twenty. I was like that myself once." But he never had been like it. His cynicism, artificial from the first, had grown to its present dimensions out of very different materials; out of wealth and idleness, and ennui; in this boy it had been born of wrong, and want, and ill-usage. It was clear that Aunt Jane was not a topic suitable for discussion over the genial weed.

"How far can one see from these windows in the daytime? There is a mist on the lake, which suggests immensity."

"Well, it *is* a good size, and also uncommonly deep, but on a clear day, you can catch a glimpse of the sea itself. The view is then really worth looking at. 'The crowded farms and lessening towers that mingle with the bounding main.'"

"You are fond of poetry, Master Lawrence. Well, so was I once, though now I can no longer enjoy, but only criticise. Life with me is reduced to its lowest terms."

"And yet you have everything in the world that you can want," put in the other, with a

quickness which showed it was not the first time that reflection had occurred to him.

"Quite true, but unfortunately I want nothing. My desires are comprehended in the one word Comfort, which, however, includes plenty of tobacco. Take a cigar."

Sir Charles produced from his pocket a case of the size of a small portmanteau.

"Thank you," returned the other, selecting one of its Gargantuan tenants. "I have never seen such a giant as this, not even as 'the Marchioness' says, 'in shops.'"

"It has not a giant's strength, it will not hurt you."

"Strength? I am not at all afraid of that," smiled the lad; "this is the sort of thing I smoke."

He produced a cake of tobacco, quite hard, and intensely black.

The baronet took it up and examined it with unaffected interest. "Dear me, what *is* it?"

"It is cheap," returned the young fellow quietly; "the name of the brand is of secondary importance."

"But you have to use tools, a pickaxe, if not blasting powder."

"No, I cut it with a knife."

"My poor boy; and yet the Satrap is said to be the richest man in these parts."

"The Satrap?"

"I mean your grandfather. He is so magnificent and mysterious that I am always searching about for some noble name to fit him."

"His grandson, however, has only a shilling a week pocket money," returned the other drily.

"A shilling a week!" The vexed question of "What is a Pound?" seemed to be recurring to Sir Charles's mind in connection with this very inferior coin; what was a shilling? It did not even represent the price of one of his cigars. "If the Commissioner treats you in this way I shall have to find quite another class of names for him. I had no idea he was so restricted in his ideas. Let us call him the Commissionaire."

"Oh, it's not my grandfather; he is scarcely aware of my existence. It is Uncle Robert and Aunt Jane. 'You must keep him short,' they say to my poor mother, who, indeed, has no means of keeping me long—I mean otherwise."

The mixture of humour and bitterness in the lad was curious. If he had been doing his best to make himself agreeable to his companion, instead of speaking out of the fulness of his heart, he could not have hit upon a better way. Sir Charles was not only amused but something more. With every puff of his cigar he felt more kindly towards the young fellow, and more antagonistic to his enemies.

"Have you no friends, my lad, beside the one you have made to-day," he said, gently, "and, of course, your mother?"

A flush of gratitude came into the boy's face; he beheld a patron, as he thought, in his companion, but without a patron's manners, which would have been intolerable to him; for though poor as Job he was proud as Lucifer. Sir Charles understood the flush perfectly well, but from a natural delicacy of mind, and also because he wished for information upon another point, he affected to ascribe it to another cause.

"Your face, my boy, has already answered my question. You *have* a friend under this roof beside your mother, and almost as dear to you. She is the young lady to whom I owe the pleasure of your society to-night, is it not so?"

Again the young fellow blushed, but answered without embarrassment, "Yes, Ruth is a true friend; and as brave as she is true. She dares to be kind to me even in my uncle's presence. Sometimes I think," exclaimed the boy, rising from his chair and pacing the room in uncontrollable excitement, "I shall stick a knife into that man. You don't know what a false and cruel brute he is."

"I can make a tolerable guess at it; but never, my dear fellow, use a knife. There can be no 'misadventure' about a knife. If you

must needs resort to such strong measures use a revolver, which is always liable to go off by accident. Shall I send you one by parcels post?"

"Well, of course, I was not in earnest," returned Lawrence, with half a smile, "though the man I am speaking of would have no scruple about murder, if his own neck was safe. I have seen it in his eye a score of times."

"That is the worst of having an expressive countenance, when one is a scoundrel," observed Sir Charles philosophically. "Our friend Mr. Grueby's face is a blank, which has been of great advantage to him. It is one thing to have a forehead with scoundrel written on it like a birthmark, and quite another to have it merely a clean space for other people to write upon, when they have found you out. You may say he *has* been found out, but it gave him time in which to misbehave himself unsuspected; and he did not lose the opportunity. A parson is like a woman; when he's bad, he's very bad."

"And when he's good, he's very good," remarked Lawrence, in a tone of conviction.

"You have discovered that, have you?" said the other incredulously.

Sir Charles had his reasons — explicable enough, if not very good ones, for disliking clergymen of all sorts. It is customary with men of his class and kind to think contemptu-

ously of them; they find a reproach to themselves in their very existence, their sacred calling; they disbelieve in their faith and fancy that themselves must disbelieve in it; they belittle their works, or even impute to them a dishonest motive. Whatever was good in Sir Charles—and there was good—was, as it were, outside *their* good, and had no connection with it.

"The best man I have ever known, however," observed Lawrence gravely ("present company excepted," interpolated the other) "was a clergyman. It was my old tutor, Mr. Percy."

The frown, that fruit of opposition, which hung upon Sir Charles's brow, grew darker.

"Percy was your tutor, was he?" he said in an altered tone; there was marked displeasure in it, which however escaped the other's notice. He was too full of his subject, which was a very interesting one to him, to regard it.

"Yes; though unfortunately only for a few months. Do you know him?"

"I did know him at one time," returned Sir Charles indifferently.

"Then I am sure you liked him," cried the young fellow enthusiastically.

To this there was no response.

"I suppose his lessons were thought too dear for you by your good uncle."

"No, it was not that. Mr. Percy would, I believe, have taught me for nothing, but he fell out with Mr. Grueby."

"I remember; pulled him up before the Bishop. Well, in mustering our forces, we may leave Mr. Percy out of our calculations, as being too far off to be an ally. Is there no one else in the house, save those you have mentioned, who wishes you well?"

"No one, save Aunt Jerry."

"Aunt Jerry? One would think she was an uncle."

"Yes. It was from her husband's Christian name, indeed, that she derives her own. It was Jeremiah."

"To be sure. He made some figure in these parts at one time as a mine owner, but was eventually swallowed up by his own property, like the eagle transfixed by the arrow sped from his own wing. Not that he was much like an eagle in other respects, if I remember right."

"Still he was thought highly enough of till he died a pauper. You may imagine the position of the widow of such a failure among her relatives at the Hall? She is ill and broken, and they affect to believe she is 'not all there.'"

"She is so far to be congratulated," observed Sir Charles drily. "There is on your side then your mother, Miss Ruth, and Aunt Jerry; and

against you the pro-consul, Mr. Robert, and Miss Jane."

Lawrence nodded. "Equal in number but very disproportionate in strength," he sighed.

"And there is the usual complement of spies and underlings on the stronger side, I conclude."

"No. I have no enemy among the servants. I don't say I have deserved their goodwill; perhaps it is because they hate their master and mistress; but they are as civil to me as though I had the power of rewarding them."

Sir Charles thought to himself that in the case of such a comely and pleasant young fellow there might be a reason for the sympathy of at least all female hearts.

"It is a humiliation to us, though they are far from intending it," continued the lad, "that both Aunt Jerry and I see that they pity us."

"You two are in Coventry together, then?"

"Yes, when anyone is at the Hall, and in the evening she and I are always condemned to have our meals in her room. We are not thought good enough for the dining-room society."

"Well, upon my life, it seems to me that any change should be welcome to you, my poor boy. I heard something said about Singapore."

The young fellow's face grew troubled.

"Yes, I am to be sent there in a year's time, to fill a vacancy that will occur there in a merchant's office. It doubtless seems to you that I ought to 'jump at it,' but I don't jump."

"Home has still certain attractions for you, then," observed the other, looking critically at his cigar.

"No, it is not that, or not entirely that; but since you are so kind as to show an interest in my poor affairs, I may say that I have the vanity to believe that if I could once get the chance, I could make my own living in England."

"Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay, eh?"

"There is something of that in it, no doubt; but at the risk of arousing your ridicule——"

"There is no risk of that," put in Sir Charles gently; "if you have the least fear of wearing your heart upon your sleeve lest I should peck at it, dismiss it. Though no more like an eagle than was your uncle Jerry, I am no daw."

"I am sure of that," said Lawrence earnestly. "But I know what is thought of young persons who flatter themselves they have a turn for literature and hope to make a living by their pen."

"And what is it you think you may be able to write?"

"Stories."

"Well, well, it might have been worse," said Sir Charles, with a little sigh of relief.

"Might it?" returned Lawrence in a voice half humorous, half plaintive. "How could it have been worse?"

"Well, it might have been poetry, my dear fellow."

CHAPTER XI.

THE COURAGE OF HIS OPINIONS.

THERE was silence for awhile between the two companions—so different in their natures and yet, as it seemed, so well pleased with one another—at that word "poetry." Lawrence, for the first time, looked a little embarrassed; his lips parted as if about to speak, but nothing came of it; the amused smile which should by right have illumined the baronet's features remained *perdu*; he had the cynic's faculty of making a dark lantern of his mirth. It would have been easy enough to pursue the subject, for he already had the data, but he wished the confessions of his young friend to be voluntary and not extorted.

"As to stories, my good lad, you are quite right in supposing that that is the only line of business to be adopted in literature, if you want more than bread and cheese; but you will forgive me for saying that it is necessary to have a story to tell."

"Not at all," said Lawrence laughing, "to

judge by the success of yonder novels," and he pointed to a pile of cheap fiction, chiefly of transatlantic origin, heaped upon his bookcase.

"True; but there is a certain knowledge of life that does not come by instinct, and which writers of twenty years of age do not possess. Even novel readers prefer seasoned wits—experience that is at least equal to their own."

"I know it, I know it," exclaimed the young fellow impatiently; "but I am really not such a fool as you think me."

"If you think that, it is a very small tribute to my discernment," put in Sir Charles smiling. "If it was so I should not be here, for example; I hate a fool much more, I fear, than a knave."

"I am speaking of the apparent folly of my expectations," returned the young fellow, taking no notice of the implied compliment. "My position is rather peculiar. I have read a good deal of what I believe will be of service for my purpose; and my surroundings, you will admit, are exceptional."

"He is going to lampoon his relatives," thought the baronet to himself. "Upon my word they would make good material."

"I am thoroughly acquainted with such life as is to be found in Hillsland," continued Lawrence, "both above and below ground, and I think that I have some faculty of description."

He spoke not only with confidence—which is

common enough with literary beginners—but in a tone of intense conviction; with the air, too, of one who has looked long at the subject on which he discourses, and from all points of view. It began to occur to Sir Charles's mind that in his friendly feeling towards this budding genius he had "let himself in" for more than he had intended. He still, however, felt kindly disposed to the lad, while the sense of responsibility with which the giving advice to the young troubles some people, sat so lightly on his shoulders as not to be perceptible.

"I have told you I have sunk to the condition of a critic, my good fellow," he said cheerfully, "and though my opinion may be of the usual value of 'advice gratis,' it is quite at your service; if you will show me some of your productions, of which I am sure you have many, and they are of moderate length—eh? Why do you laugh?"

Lawrence, indeed, was laughing heartily. The apprehensions of his companion had made themselves so manifest under the cloak (though it was no disguise) of friendly interest, that it was too much for his sense of humour.

"Though it might not have been so bad as an epic, you feared that it might be a three-volume novel," he said smiling. "Perhaps it even struck you that I might have offered to read it to you?"

"No, no, my dear fellow, I didn't think that," said Sir Charles with apologetic haste. "The man who lays his hand upon one of his own manuscripts, and even in the way of kindness reads it aloud to his friend, deserves—well, deserves to have a Robert Stratton for his uncle."

"Quite true, and you can't go further than that," said Lawrence gravely. "But since you are so very kind as to offer me your opinion—which will be invaluable to me, for I know no one to consult on such matters—I will some day put a specimen or two of my poor productions into your hands. Now I will not talk shop any more—good heavens, the coffee!"

"Is there coffee? I shall almost think it comes from heaven."

"A thousand pardons; but I am unused to the obligations of hospitality. Your kindness and sociability drove everything else out of my mind, but coffee is the one thing I can give you. My grandfather, in a fit of generosity, or in some sudden recollection of her existence, once gave Aunt Jerry some which is really excellent, and she gave me a share of it."

"Long live the Rajah!" exclaimed Sir Charles enthusiastically. "No one can tell what I have suffered, my good lad, for the last hour. Your conversation is delightful, but I confess I did want my coffee."

If Lawrence had entertained a doubt—which

he had not—of the genuineness of his friend's sentiments hitherto, there could be no suspicion at least of this one. The drink in question was one of those "comforts" he had confessed were indispensable to him. The host went to a cupboard and brought out a battered coffee-pot and a spirit lamp, while his guest, with a cigar in his mouth and a languid interest in his eye, examined the book-case.

"You have Byron's works here, I see. 'Childe Harold' seems to have been a recent acquisition, and 'Don Juan' an earlier; it is more thumbed, at all events."

"Well, the fact is, I can't read the 'Childe.' At the risk of falling in your estimation I must admit he wearies me."

"Never mind my estimation; always speak your mind with me. As it happens, I think no worse of you. I have been at all the places described, which of course adds an interest to the poem, and yet he wearies me."

"Byron seems to me melodramatic; too much given up to egotism and vanity; he suggests nothing."

The baronet smiled.

"Well, it is not my mission to defend him 'Other men other minds,' is an aphorism which applies to the poet most of all; the generation who most esteems him is almost always his own generation, though not perhaps at first."

"That was not the way with Shelley and Keats."

"True, nor with Tennyson, though I can remember when Tennyson was pronounced 'girlish' and even 'unintelligible.' A great scholar, a friend of mine, always shook his head at 'Tears, idle Tears' because he couldn't put it into Latin verse."

"That would be my difficulty, too," said Lawrence laughing; "and yet to me it is the most beautiful and suggestive poem in the language."

"If that is your opinion of it at twenty, you may judge what is mine at fifty, when one feels what you only imagine."

"And yet you tell me you are no longer appreciative?"

"Well, I suppose one is human after all," returned the other, "that is, occasionally."

He looked annoyed, like a man about town, who is recognised by an acquaintance while piloting a blind beggar across the street. "You have 'Don Quixote' and 'Gil Blas,' I see, which everybody reads—enough to swear by."

"Yes. Bury me in what living tomb you please," said Lawrence pathetically, "but give me my 'Don Quixote,' and a light to read it by, and I am content. Strip me of house and land, but leave me 'Gil Blas,' and you will never rob me of my mirth."

The baronet laughed outright. "Upon my life, my young friend, you have the courage of your opinions; but you will find it just as well to keep them to yourself, if you mean to be on good terms with the critics. Here is 'Tristram Shandy,' that, too, is not dropping to pieces from over use, I notice."

"How is it possible to like a book in which the author rarely finishes a chapter, or even a sentence, and 'gets no forrarder' in a hundred pages; it is like driving a gig from John O'Groat's house to the Land's End with a jibbing horse. There are occasional indecencies, I admit, but not nearly so many as he is credited with."

"And that is the way you speak of one of our British classics!" cried the baronet, holding up his delicate hands.

"Well, the fact is, I suppose, that being cut off from all occupation and amusement, I have been compelled to *read* the immortal Sterne, which is not the case with the majority of his admirers—Here's your coffee, Sir Charles, at last."

But the baronet, capricious even in his desires, had already fixed his attention elsewhere. "Why here is an unpublished volume; a treasure in MS.; by Jingo, and in verse too. Why you're a rhymester after all!"

"I never said I wasn't," replied the young

fellow doggedly; "no one is bound to criminate himself; besides, you only said in speaking of my literary ambition you were 'glad it was not poetry'; and so far you may be glad still."

"Your modesty does you credit, my lad, but these verses begin well.

> "'Cherry cheeked, merry eyed,
> Lip apart, head aside,
> Crowned with thy golden hair;
> Maiden, this youth of thine,
> Far more than men or wine,
> Breedeth joy, slayeth care.'

"They are addressed 'To——,' I see, quite on the old fashion."

"Yes, they are," observed Lawrence drily.

"A very proper reproof to my curiosity," returned the other, closing the little book. "It is a private volume, and I ought not to have opened it."

"Why should you not have done so, since it was in the bookcase with the rest? I had no intention of inflicting any of its contents upon you, but since you have them there they are quite at your service." Sir Charles resumed his seat, and sipped his coffee, book in hand; he turned over its pages with languid interest. "Melancholy, of course," he murmured, as if to himself; "when we are young and vigorous we are melancholy out of 'pure cussedness,' when

we grow old we are so by compulsion. 'Lines on dejection!' 'Farewell,' it's like saying 'good-bye' instead of 'good morning.' 'Poverty,' well you do know something about that, my lad. What's this? 'The Home Spirit.'

"'Like a sunbeam gliding over common places,
About this dreary home of ours she moves,
What'er her hands are set unto she graces,
Her duties not beneath the things she loves.'

"A good line that.

"'Serene, unconscious of her perfect sweetness,
As one of those moss-roses she hath tied
In clustered beauty, with some art past neatness
As born high-heartedness excelleth pride.'

"Pretty, *very*. What follows too is good and the last verse charming,

"'Ah! bliss to him to whom she shall be given!
Fond heart, clear head, pure soul and form so fair,
Her spirit well might cleave to it in Heaven,
And meet him changeless and unangeled there.'

"Has the angel ever seen this?"

"What angel?" inquired Lawrence, looking into his coffee cup, as if to tell his fortune by the dregs.

"The young lady to whom these lines are addressed. She walks the earth, I suppose, at present?"

"Yes; she has seen them."

"And the other?"

"What other?"

"Come, come, you might credit me with some small degree of intelligence. 'Lip apart, head aside, crowned with golden hair.' Has *she* seen *that?*"

"Yes, 'the other,' as you call her, has seen that."

"Then I will ask no more questions, though one more was on the tip of my tongue."

"Pray ask it, if you have a mind."

"I was going to inquire whether the angel had seen the other verses, or the lady with the golden hair those addressed to the angel; but it is unnecessary, for I am quite sure they have not—there now, I have annoyed you; I cannot say how I regret it. I told you I was a cynic, but I did not mean to be rude; pray forgive me."

"I have done that already," said the young fellow, but the cloud still sat on his mobile face. "I can't afford to quarrel with you."

"Ah, that is cruel, a weapon forbidden by the comity of nations. Put yourself in my place."

"True," said Lawrence penitently, "I should not have said it, but what you have just said about melancholy applies to us in a reverse sense as regards bitterness. You are bitter

because it is your fancy to be so; I am bitter from circumstances over which I have no control."

"You are quite right, and I have been quite wrong," continued the baronet, holding out his hand. "And in token of forgiveness I must ask you to pilot me back to my own room. I shall know my way here before I leave Hillsland Hall, for we shall, I hope, have many another chat together."

CHAPTER XII.

THE HONOURED GUEST.

Sir Charles had been no hypocrite in his show of interest in the affairs of his young friend. He even felt a sort of gratitude to him for having evoked it. Sentiment of almost all kinds was well-nigh dead within him, and he was not displeased to have it resuscitated. It has been well observed that we do not leave our vices, our vices leave us, and the same thing is true of our nobler emotions; as we grow old, and especially if we have passed our lives in idleness and pleasure, not only our illusions, but our sympathies, gradually die out. In some cases, avarice, the desire of useless gain, swallows up, like Aaron's rod, all other feelings, but from that curse, at least, Sir Charles was free. He was by no means too much of a gentleman to do things that were base, but he shrank from anything sordid; his nature, if not delicate, was fastidious. But he only spoke the simple truth when he had said that he cared only for comfort;

as regarded all other matters his character had become a stagnant pool. There still, however, lay within it in process of dissolution some elements of good, and they had been brought to the surface by Lawrence Merridew. He was genuinely interested in the young fellow; the contempt and neglect with which he was treated by his relatives aroused his indignation, while at the same time it flattered the baronet's self-esteem. The behaviour of Mr. Robert and Miss Jane were, he persuaded himself, exactly what was to be expected, and corroborated his cynical and pessimistic views of life.

There was something else, too, which quickened his decaying interests. Mr. Robert was a far cleverer knave than he gave him credit for, and had shown his cleverness in baiting his hook for the *blasé* baronet. He had gathered that Sir Charles had been struck with Ruth, when he met her at the bazaar, and had rightly concluded that his admiration of her would be increased by a nearer acquaintance. Certain Eastern jewels in the ex-Commissioner's possession—he had quite a collection of such treasures—about which Sir Charles had expressed some curiosity, had favoured the pretext for inviting him to Hillsland Hall, but the unconscious Ruth was the Kohinoor on whose beauty he relied to dazzle his father's guest; and this object had been so far accomplished.

To say that Sir Charles had fallen in love with her, would indeed have been a monstrous exaggeration; but he was greatly struck with her. In his youth he had been a victim to the fair sex; later on these relations had been reversed; and in his maturity he had still a weakness for them, though tempered by experience. At fifty years of age, however, he was still vain enough to imagine that, if he chose to take trouble enough, he could inspire even a girl with the tender passion; he possessed very great and rare advantages for such a conquest, and did not underrate them. On the other hand, it was necessary that the young person in question should be somewhat isolated, ignorant of the world, and (especially) without other suitors more eligible as regarded age. He could have won her perhaps away even from them, unwillingly; but with that he would not have been content. He was exacting in that respect. Much as he had admired Ruth in the drawing-room, he had a suspicion that his admiration was thrown away, from the manner in which she spoke of Lawrence; if her affections were already fixed on her cousin, he felt it was hopeless to attempt to win them, though he might win *her*. If *he* had been charmed with the young fellow on so short an acquaintance, he could easily understand how attractive he must be to one of the other sex, living under the same roof with him, and deeply

sympathising with the unmerited cruelty with which he was treated. His poverty, his wrongs, his lack of friends, would be so many claims upon her generosity and tenderness.

In the face of such rivalship the baronet would have withdrawn from the struggle, though backed by all the grandfathers, aunts, and uncles in Christendom. With Lawrence Merridew in his mind's eye, it was impossible to regard his own maturer charms with complacency, and though he could give him many points in the art of pleasing, the natural attraction of the lad —his enthusiasm, his literary ambition, his touching, though doubtless misplaced, confidence in himself, and his youthful brightness—would outweigh his efforts even in that direction. But his conversation with Lawrence that evening, so far at least as that young gentleman was concerned, had relieved his mind with respect to Ruth; he felt convinced that the lad's affections were engaged elsewhere, no doubt to the young lady in whose company he had seen him in the orchard that day. The verses, the discovery of which had caused Lawrence such embarrassment, described her personal appearance, so far as Sir Charles remembered it, and he had still a sharp eye for a pretty face, accurately enough; whereas the reading those other verses evidently depicting someone else, and presumably Ruth, had awakened in their composer no embarrassment at

all. They were not like the former, a picture drawn by passionate admiration, but merely, at most, by tender esteem. In eliciting this information Sir Charles had been obliged to run the risk of giving offence to his young friend, but it had been worth the risk, and no offence, save for the passing moment, had been taken. Without confessing as much to himself, he felt more pleased with Lawrence, as regarded this matter, than with all else. His impulse to befriend him and assist his simple plans was greatly strengthened by it. To do good to one's enemies is an injunction which a good many people find it difficult to obey, and it is possible that Sir Charles's generous intentions towards Lawrence would have dwindled away had he found in him a rival. As matters stood, he felt all the vehemence of goodwill which is entertained by those who only very seldom propose to themselves a scheme of benevolence; moreover, it was aided by a cordial dislike for Lawrence's persecutors.

Mr. Robert had made a very bad impression on him; nor, curiously enough, did he thank him for the opportunity he had afforded him of approaching Ruth herself, the motives for which, while entirely exculpating her from all collusion with them, he thoroughly understood. Miss Jane, he thought almost equally objectionable: a hard woman, even with the mitigations of

youth and good looks, was hateful to him; and cruelty and oppression—for though he had been very cruel in his time, and taken advantage of the weakness of others, his conduct had never appeared to him in that light—were revolting to his nature.

The question that now presented itself to Sir Charles was not so much how to help his young friend, about which he felt tolerably sanguine, but how to show friendship to him without arousing the anger or increasing the bitterness of his enemies. He might, indeed, have ignored him, and only sought his companionship, as he had already done, surreptitiously; but there were limits to his self-denial. His capacity for boredom was exceedingly small; he could not even, for Lawrence's sake, endure any period of imprisonment at the Hall, combined with the hard labour of making himself agreeable to Mr. Robert, or listening to the ex-Commissioner's lectures upon irrigation. He must have some intelligent person to converse with. He was not a man that could stand being shown over the stables every morning, by anybody; or talked to about the crops, which at Hillsland were mostly underground. It would be a little difficult to get out of all this without compromising his *protégé*, but it must be done somehow or other, and though not till after, what he was disinclined to give to any matter, a little

serious consideration, he thought he saw his way.

At breakfast time next morning, Lawrence appeared with the rest, but not in his usual rags. Attire was not a matter that, even in his salad days, had had much attraction for Sir Charles. "If a man is a trump," he had been wont to say, "it signifies nothing about his suit"; but the spruceness of the lad's costume was a revelation to his new friend. He gathered from it, at once, that their companionship of the previous evening had become known, and that since the honoured guest had taken an inexplicable fancy to this insignificant member of the household, his relatives had thought it worth while that the lad should be attired like a gentleman. And so indeed it was. It had been Mr. Robert's intention to keep him out of sight during Sir Charles's stay, since he shrewdly suspected that whatever the lad might have to say to him would not be to the credit of his rulers and betters; but now that the mischief had been done, it was clearly injudicious to corroborate by an open show of ill-treatment any slanders he may have uttered. The fact was that Mr. Robert, ferreting about in "the Warren," had actually come upon his nephew on his way to his own room after leaving that of Sir Charles. He had been in hopes of having caught him out in some delinquency, but the lad's manner, always bold enough, at once

convinced him by its "infernal impertinence" (as he afterwards described it to Aunt Jane) that he had been mistaken.

"If you want to know what I have been about——"

"I do," put in Mr. Robert furiously.

"I have been smoking a cigar with Sir Charles Walden."

It was an unpleasant piece of information as it stood, but if he had known how large a share Sir Charles's dislike of himself had had to do with it, Mr. Robert Stratton would have been still more disgusted; as it was he set it down to the baronet's disinclination to the company of Mr. Grueby, for which he was compelled to admit there was some excuse. The parson and he had had that matter out together, not entirely to his own advantage, and the Master of the House had at a later hour, dwelt upon his clerical friend's behaviour with much distinctness of condemnation. "For the future, sir, at all events," the old gentleman had fumed out, "since your plan of introducing a drunken helot for his entertainment has broken down, see that Sir Charles has his own way while he remains with us in every particular."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE "STRETCHER."

"SEE that Sir Charles has his own way." That fiat of the ex-Commissioner's, delivered with all the vehemence of which he was capable (and this was still considerable), was of great service to the baronet's plan. On the previous day, Mr. Robert had endeavoured to impress him with the extent and pressing nature of his occupations, "The cares of a vast estate which my father is no longer in a condition to superintend, etc. etc.," and this his guest now opportunely called to mind.

"You must not treat me, Mr. Robert, as a stranger within your gates," he said. "There is no greater nuisance in a house where the host has his duties to perform than a mere idler; if I am not to be looked upon as one of the family, I shall take myself off."

It was quite touching to see how Miss Jane was affected by this threat, at once so terrible and so friendly. "If you can only be content with

our goodwill, Sir Charles—for I am afraid we have few attractions indeed to offer you——" Here she stopped, doubtless from emotion, and placed her hand upon her niece's shoulder, who happened to be her neighbour, either for support or in illustration of the attractions of which she spoke.

"Content?" he said. "If only I can feel assured that I am putting no one to inconvenience I shall enjoy myself thoroughly. I always think that in large country houses, such as this, the guest is happiest who is left to his own devices, unless, indeed, he is one of those miserable men who require to be amused."

"But some of us ladies who have nothing to do," observed Miss Jane, "will be very happy to entertain you, or, at all events, to do their best to do so," and again she suffered her fingers to stray caressingly on Ruth's shoulder.

"I shall be troublesome enough to them, no doubt," he answered smiling, "but for this morning I have promised myself a long walk with Master Lawrence, yonder, for my cicerone." His tone was as indifferent as he could make it, and he did not even so much as look at the lad as he spoke; but it was plain nevertheless that his proposal was not a welcome one to the lady of the house.

"Lawrence is at your service, of course," she said, with such marked coldness that Mr.

Robert felt it his duty to tender an explanation of it.

"It seems to me, Sir Charles," he observed slily, "that you have made the ladies rather jealous."

"If any of them is equal to a ten-mile stretch," exclaimed the guest, "I need not say how glad I shall be of her company; but I am under a vow, imposed by my medical adviser, to do that amount of walking whenever possible."

It was known that the baronet was a great pedestrian, though it was not so generally understood that he was under the doctor's hands, so that his transparent little fib passed muster; and for the rest of the meal he did his best to curry favour with Miss Jane (and at the same time to please himself) by paying attention to Ruth. *That*, he felt, was his best way out of his difficulty as regarded Lawrence, and it was a very pleasant way. His proposal of companionship with her cousin had evidently gratified her; it was plain she admired his courage in exploding what was little less than a bombshell to her aunt and uncle in thus taking by the hand the object of their contempt and ill-treatment, and perhaps (he thought) she envied that social position which had enabled him to do it with impunity. The subject that most interested Ruth, when he had the opportunity of speaking with her out of earshot of the rest, he soon found to be Lawrence,

which, though from one point of view unwelcome, was in another at least convenient. It was one which not only gave him an opportunity for eloquence, but also for presenting to her the most attractive side of his character, his sympathy with the weak, his contempt for the oppressor, and the interest he felt in the lad's literary ambition.

In public he prudently took as little notice of him as possible. He displayed the same caution as respected Mrs. Merridew, and even Aunt Jerry, so careful was he not to offend the higher powers more than could be helped. Why he troubled himself to undertake a part so altogether strange to his nature and habits was a question he would have found some difficulty in answering; but though it could not be said, at present, at all events, that he played it for love, he certainly threw himself into it *con amore*. Mrs. Jeremiah Lock, by the way, had been presented to him for the first time that morning; a spiritless and almost speechless lady, prematurely old, and who evidently shrank from all observation. Ruth had saluted her with great tenderness, which had power to revive her a little as water re-animates some fading flower, bound to wither, but her air and manner was with others painful in its humility; she appeared to be making a perpetual apology for her own existence, though it was pretty plain that she

would not long give offence by it. The obvious delicacy of her state of health, indeed, gave a pathos to features which would have been otherwise uninteresting and commonplace enough.

Sir Charles, who was not without imagination, pictured her to himself as a once light-hearted and perhaps even comely woman, whose spirits had been crushed out of her by years of dependence and oppression; but Aunt Jerry had been always dull and plain, though she had taken Mr. Lock's fancy, or whatever had been the substitute for it. She was thought at the time to have made the best match of the family, but the fortune her Jeremiah had made for himself was even then a little "dipped," and had gone on dipping (underground) until nothing remained of it but shares in unproductive mines, or what was worse, liabilities. Even those who had regarded her most charitably thought her "a poor creature," as indeed she was, and it had even been said of her that she was "a little touched in the upper decks"; in this, however, they were mistaken, though it would have been better for her, perhaps, had it been so; but—

> "To know the change and feel it,
> When there was none to heed it,
> Nor numbed sense to feel it,"

was poor Aunt Jerry's lot.

From the circumstance of their being both

in the same condemnation by the authorities—though in her case this came from no particular antagonism, they only pronounced her "not presentable"—Lawrence and she were thrown a good deal together; but the young fellow did not pretend to have much regard for her. He pitied and was kind to her, as he would have been to any creature in distress, but he had no more sympathy with her, individually, than she with him, and he would rather, perhaps, have been left to himself altogether, than to her commonplace company, except for certain material advantages—such as the coffee—which it brought him. But with Ruth it was different; when Aunt Jerry would sometimes complain, "I am not clever enough for Lorry; he doesn't care for a stupid, tedious old woman like me," it sent a pang through her tender heart. She would never blame her cousin. "Lorry is very peculiar, Aunt Jerry," she would reply, "he is rapt in quite other matters than those which concern you and me, but he is very fond of you, I'm sure," yet in secret she wished Lorry had been more genial with his relative. To her it signified little that Aunt Jerry cared nothing for music, poetry, painting, and the fine arts, and was in fact very dull and unattractive; the adversity into which she had fallen was claim enough upon her goodwill, and the poor old woman (though she was not really old, though

she seemed to be so both to herself and others) repaid her kindnesses with all the affection of which she was capable.

Something of this Sir Charles soon gathered from Ruth herself, for his frankness was contagious; and, indeed, when a man is really frank, and at the same time understands how to make his confidences agreeable, he possesses the very best equipment for the conquest of all hearts. That is, all tender ones; in dealing with others—the harsh ones—he is apt to be at a disadvantage. There is nothing, it is justly said, so attractive as naturalness, but that presupposes the same attribute in the person attracted. Sir Charles, for example, would certainly not have recommended himself to his host, or to his host's son, by a display of frankness; indeed, if he had carried that virtue to extremity his stay at Hillsland Hall would have come to an end at once; his very invitation, we may say, would have been incontinently cancelled. But his air of candour was, in his communications with them, most useful to him. He had not only the *ars celare artem,* but the art of appearing most open when he was concealing his own sentiments, and even speaking in direct contradiction to them. "What gives me the greatest pleasure," he once said, "is to hoodwink scoundrels," but gratifying as that social amusement undoubtedly is, it is apt to encourage a

habit of duplicity with reference even to honest members of the community; and as—

> "The playing the games whose moves are Death
> Makes a man draw too proud a breath,"

so the making fools or puppets of our fellow-creatures is apt to deteriorate the moral character.

No apprehension of that kind, however, ever entered Sir Charles's mind, or would perhaps have disturbed it, had it done so. Whatever were his faults, self-consciousness—that microscopical inspection of our feelings and their consequences which is so fashionable nowadays, but so deadly dull to read about in books—was not among them. If he had been a beggar living from hand to mouth, he could not have taken "shorter views" about everything. Sufficient for the day, with him, was the pleasure thereof; and this cynical, brilliant, *blasé* man of the world was in his pleasures as impulsive as a schoolboy. That this idiosyncrasy had wrecked his life—though to the common eye there seemed so much of salvage about it as to make the disaster count for little—he was well aware; but that did not alter matters nor him. A natural disposition, strengthened and encouraged by circumstances, is not like the backbone of a fish, that can be eliminated with a silver fork by a skilled hand; it remains with us till we drop into our graves.

Strange, therefore, as it might seem, and especially to those who thought they knew him best, Sir Charles started for his "stretcher" with his young friend that morning with almost the same sense of thoughtless enjoyment as his companion; the boy, in fact, was much the more thoughtful of the two, having as he imagined (as the other, indeed, would have readily acknowledged) much more to think about. The idea had not unnaturally taken root in his mind that it was possible he had found in his new friend a helper, nay—such had been the sympathy evinced in his literary aspirations—almost a helpmate, small as seemed the opportunity. It was the first chink, as it were, through which the lad had seen daylight. Youth and hope are better castle builders (in the air) than can be found in the Society of Architects; somehow he ventured to believe that Sir Charles could smooth the way for him, if not to the dizzy heights of the Temple of Fame, at all events to some moderate elevation above the waters of want; and in the meantime he was immensely pleased at having been chosen for his cicerone in their morning's ramble.

Lawrence Merridew was a true lover of nature, and the task of pointing out the beauties of Hillsland was very congenial to him, for they were well worth attention. The village, a very picturesque one, was itself highly placed, but

above it towered a great table-land, crested with forests of firs, from which there was a truly magnificent view. In the fresh and vigorous air that always blew there the odour of the pine trees was mingled with the "scent of the sea," borne inland for many a mile. Between the village and the ocean lay quite another district, that of the mines, but the disfigurement they caused on the surface were from this altitude hardly noticeable, and merely gave variety to the landscape. Sir Charles listened to his young friend with less of interest than amusement, as he descanted enthusiastically upon this and that object of admiration; for he did not much care for "nature." The primrose by the river's brim was a primrose to him and nothing more, nor did the daffodil haunt his dreams; and he took a similar prosaic view of landscape. What it all suggested to the elder man, when it suggested anything, was of a wholly different kind to the thoughts it awakened in the younger. At the topmost clump of firs Lawrence halted—

"This is the finest view we have," he said. "Half the county lies beneath us."

"Yes; I was here once before," returned the other indifferently, but with a certain air of unpleasant reminiscence too, "when I was standing for it."

"When you were standing for what?" asked Lawrence puzzled.

"The county. You know nothing about it, of course," added the other, in reply to his look of astonishment, "and besides, I didn't get in."

"How was that?" said Lawrence, not quite knowing what he said; he felt that he had stumbled upon a disagreeable topic.

"Well—not that it signifies—but it was the tongue of slander." He murmured to himself contemptuously the well-known motto of a northern college, "They say; what say they? *Let* them say," and resumed his walk with rapid steps in silence.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE CORNER.

That long-continued silence was the first sign of egotism Sir Charles had manifested to his young companion. Considering their relative ages and positions he had hitherto shown an unlooked for abnegation of self; he had thrown himself, if not heart and soul, at all events with the appearance of so doing, into the other's affairs, with a complete abnegation of his own. But now, it seemed, he had begun to think of them. His smooth brow was furrowed, his "Cupidon" lips twitched with strange excitement, or closed together tightly. The impassive, gracious man was troubled with some reminiscence of his past. There were still living many men who would have said, "And no wonder," but they were not those who had known him best. His nature was not one given to retrospection, far less to cry over spilt milk. But that recollection of having been rejected for the county was bitter to him, for it had been one of

the few occasions when his *amour propre* had been wounded. So it often happens in the long catalogue of our sins against God and man, that the consequence of one of them, though it may have been a very inadequate punishment for it, stands out in our memory, and makes us appear to ourselves aggrieved. It had been almost the only time, and was certainly the last, in which Sir Charles Walden had ever appealed to the opinion of his fellow-creatures, and it had been recorded against him. It had been a small matter—a very small one in comparison with other subjects of regret in his career, but none had made so great an impression upon him. There are some of us who have no remorse for serious offences, but it takes very little to embitter their lives. Hitherto Sir Charles had seemed to give himself up to the mood of his young companion, and even to take pains to say nothing of discouragement; but for the remainder of the walk he was at first *distrait*, and when he gradually recovered his self-possession, cynical.

"It is amazing to me," he presently said, "that with all this love of yours for nature, you should have such an ambition for things outside it; you ought to be a philosopher, or rather a philosophic poet, content with 'the root and the spring,' and never wish to stray from these charming surroundings."

"Well, I don't wish to exchange them for

Singapore, it is very true," said Lawrence, his sense of gratitude to his companion (not perhaps unmixed with that of favours to come) struggling with a feeling of indignation at what seemed very like a sneer; "but though *you* may not see the necessity of it, Sir Charles, I must live, and even 'the root' you speak of would in my case not be forthcoming." Though the lad's tone was quiet, his face showed what he felt.

"Forgive me, my dear boy," said the other impulsively, "I spoke like a brute to whom roots are the proper nutriment. I wanted—or rather the devil within me wanted—to say something spiteful, and I said it to the wrong person. Why, that is Hurlby, is it not, out yonder?"

"Yes; your round tower just peeps above the trees; when the flag is flying, which I suppose betokens your presence, it looks still more picturesque."

"You will see it nearer, soon, I hope, when the flag is flying," returned the other graciously. "There are some things in the castle that will please you."

Lawrence murmured a few words of thanks for the invitation, which indeed gave him great pleasure; and the more, since it was wholly unexpected; for he knew that Sir Charles lived the life of a recluse.

"I hope you won't find it so dull as I do," continued the baronet. "It is my experience,

however, that one can stand a visit to almost everywhere *once*, always supposing one can get away when one likes."

"I trust that that tribute to the delights of hospitality," said Lawrence laughing, "does not imply that we shall not see you again at Hillsland?"

"If so, it will not be because the Hall wants attractions, I do assure you," said the other earnestly; then, more lightly, "perhaps the Rajah may not ask me again. I have a suspicion that I have not made a favourable impression on him, and still less on your Uncle Robert."

"If it be so, that comes of befriending *me*," observed Lawrence gratefully.

"That is sad, for so far as I can I shall continue to earn his ill-will in that respect," answered the other smiling. "Now we are getting home again. Whose is that melancholy-looking house yonder, with the 'garden of the sluggard' attached to it?"

"That is Mr. Salesby's," said Lawrence with a slight flush.

"Then let us drop in and pay him a call: I owe him one, for he voted for me at the election. If Mr. Grueby is to be trusted—which, however, is doubtful—we shall get the latest Derby tip from him."

Lawrence cared nothing for Derby tips,

though perhaps as much as Sir Charles did. The latter, indeed, was simply curious to see the young lady on whom, as he had reason to suspect, his young friend had set his affections, and of whom he had already caught a fleeting glance in the orchard on the previous day. He might also have wished to renew his acquaintance, if the very little he knew of him could be so called, with Mr. Salesby, who was a "character" in his way, though not a good one. He belonged to one of the oldest families in the county, who, though they had never occupied a prominent position, had been in a fairly elevated one—till horse and hound had ruined their present representative. Dick Salesby had still a "bit of blood" on which he hunted twice a week in the season, but it was the last link with his palmy days that was left to him. His neighbours of the gentry still nodded to him in familiar fashion, but not even the humblest labourer touched his cap; the agricultural mind is dull, but it is keen to recognise superiority of position, and the want of it. His friends were only found in the pot-house, mostly hangers-on of the turf. Lawrence was ashamed of the man whom (in his brightest dreams) he pictured as his father-in-law, and of the ramshackly dwelling he called his home; but since his companion was bent on visiting it, there was no escape. He only hoped that Kitty would be away somewhere, for it would be dreadful if Sir

Charles should see her—like a jewel set in pewter —amid such sordid surroundings.

"Why the place is to let!" exclaimed Sir Charles, pointing to a notice board that leant like a drunken flag over the broken paling which fringed the neglected garden.

"No; it is Mr. Salesby's peculiar way of informing strangers of the name of his house; he calls it 'The Corner.' Some allusion to the Derby course, I believe."

"Oh, I see; Tattenham Corner. Our friend is an original."

At that moment, as if to illustrate the fact, Mr. Salesby appeared at his own front door. He was a spare little man, who, if he had been younger, might well have been taken for a jockey out of place; he looked as if he had been "sweated down," and had suffered in health in consequence. His appearance was "horsey," from the straw in his mouth to the spurs on his old ill-kept top boots. He had just come in from his morning ride through the back door of his residence, which opened conveniently on the stable yard.

"Well, Master Lorry, how goes it?" he shouted, almost as loud as a view holloa. "Come in, and bring your friend with you."

As they obeyed the invitation, and walked up the well-worn gravel walk, the visitor took note of the desolate aspect of the house—the stains of

weather it showed, the patched windows, and the blank spaces where others had long ago been built over to avoid the tax, and left so when it had been done away with.

"What! Sir Charles Walden is it?" exclaimed the host with pleased surprise as they drew nearer. "Welcome to 'The Corner.' You must be dry after a walk in this weather; have a glass of claret."

He pronounced the word—perhaps to modestly intimate the mildness of the vintage—as though it were monosyllabic.

"I would rather have a glass of ale," replied the other smiling. "I remember how good your tap used to be, though it is many years ago since I tasted it last."

"Aye; that was at the great election time, fifteen years ago. It was not my fault that you did not get in. What I said was, when people said things agen you, 'Let byegones be byegones.' Take a seat, Sir Charles."

He led them into a barely-furnished room, the walls hung round with pictures of Derby winners, looking very much alike, and a portrait of the host on horseback, very unlike him, or at all events what he had since become. It was a spick and span model of mounted propriety, and suggested a M.F.H. considering whether he should accept the office of churchwarden. The handles of the bell-ropes were foxes' "pads";

upon the mantelpiece, stuck in cheap vases, as though they had been flowers, were foxes' brushes: above them, as though it had just bitten its way through the wall, was a fox's head. There was a litter of clay pipes, fragments of tobacco, and bills headed "accounts rendered" upon the table, which Mr. Salesby cleared away by the simple process of sweeping them on to the floor with his "crop," which he still held in his hand. "They may just as well lie there as anywhere else," he grinned, "so far as any chance of their being paid is concerned."

"Yes, the times are bad indeed for us who live by the land," observed Sir Charles sympathetically.

"They're deuced bad with *me*, at all events," replied the host, not without a touch of satire and a use of the figure termed ellipsis, though he was unconscious of his obligation to it. He disliked the other's pretence of being in the same boat—"Impecuniosity"—with himself, but his sense of the duties of hospitality forbad his resenting it. He rang the bell, and on its being answered by a slatternly girl, exclaimed, "Yell, and glasses round;" then added, as she was leaving the room, "and tell your young missis to come down."

Lawrence sighed and looked out of the window, while Sir Charles fixed his attention on the portrait of their host.

"Aye, that's Stickaback," cried Mr. Salesby, —it was not from modesty that he attributed the interest of the picture to the horse, rather than to its rider, but simply that in his eyes the equine race was superior to the human—"the best timber jumper of his day, bar none. He'd ha' won the 'Liverpool' but for a cussed storm, which made the ground slippery."

"What great events hang on small causes," observed the baronet demurely.

"You may say that, for I lost four hundred pounds by his not keeping his legs—but here's the yell; where's Miss Kitty, lass?"

"She's coming up the walk now," returned the handmaid.

Lawrence was already acquainted with the fact, and indeed had been making appealing but unmistakable signs to her to go back again. Sir Charles turned to the window and beheld, as it struck him at least, one flower in the garden, which, for grace and beauty, it would have been difficult to match. Kitty Salesby was "tall and most divinely fair," but she looked her best when she moved. It has been said that only a few women know how to walk, and she had this art, which in her case was nature, to perfection. Every limb in her body was full of grace, every line a line of beauty. Her father went to the window and beckoned her in impatiently, and she replied

with a nod of assent; but such a nod! The two gestures might have been taken as examples of the coarseness and refinement of which the same sign-language is capable. Yet, strange to say, the girl was not very refined except in a physical sense. Her manner indeed was never awkward —she had no *mauvaise honte*—but there was an absence of that delicate reserve about it which, when it is not affected, is the crown of maidenly grace. She was far from bold or forward; quite free from anything that could be called vulgarity; but her bringing up and surroundings, and above all the necessity for self-assertion in domestic matters, which circumstances had imposed upon her, had given to her for so young a girl an unusual air of independence. When her father introduced his guest to her with some touch of ostentation as Sir Charles Walden, of Hurlby Castle, she took his outstretched hand without the least sign of perturbation, and when Mr. Salesby added with a dry chuckle, "Master Lawrence, I think you know," she nodded to him familiarly without embarrassment.

Naturalness, so wholly unlooked for, was not likely to escape the baronet's observation, but so far from taking advantage of it, he continued his conversation with his host, leaving the two young people to themselves. His attention, however, seemed inclined to wander; and when the ale

was being poured out by Kitty, very deftly and with a fine froth upon it, "you are not listening to what I am telling you about Ganymede," said Mr. Salesby querulously.

"I beg your pardon," said Sir Charles, "but for the moment," here he bowed his thanks to the young lady, "I was rather thinking about Hebe."

The classical allusion was lost upon both father and daughter, but Kitty would have rightly understood that a compliment had been paid her, even had not Lawrence laughed and gently clapped his hands. It pleased the young fellow exceedingly that the beauty of his inamorata had awakened the admiration of his fastidious friend.

CHAPTER XV.

THE JUDICIOUSNESS OF FIFTY.

Though Lawrence knew so little of the world, he felt grateful to Sir Charles, inasmuch as notwithstanding the favourable impression Kitty had evidently made upon him, he scarcely addressed her throughout the visit, which lasted for some time, but left him the pleasing task of entertaining her. It was the kinder of his friend because he had felt that Mr. Salesby was boring his guest to extremity with his talk of the stable, though the other showed no more sign of his sufferings than an Indian at the stake. A few words, indeed, Sir Charles did say to Kitty to show that she was not neglected; he spoke of the beauty of the neighbourhood, and joined with her in her praise of the fir groves, which he drew from her were her favourite haunts, and inquired into her occupations, the simplicity of which amused him; but on the whole he might be truly said to have sacrificed himself on the altar of friendship, and that too with such

apparent willingness that his host wrung his hand, as he took his leave, informed him that he was "the best of company," and swore that if he ever stood for the county again he would work for him "like a navvy at a barrow."

"So I have found one source at least of your poetic inspiration, Master Lorry," observed Sir Charles, as they passed through the garden gate, not without difficulty, for it hung on a single hinge. "Lip apart, head aside, crowned with thy golden hair. Eh? Well, her hair *is* golden, and there is a very fine crop of it."

The young fellow's cheek crimsoned, but not with shame; his eyes shone with pride and pleasure.

"Now, is she not the most beautiful girl you ever beheld?" he exclaimed with enthusiasm.

"No; certainly not," was the unexpected rejoinder. "My experience in such matters is probably wider than yours, but apart from that, I hold your judgment—I mean, of course, only as regards comparison—faulty."

"You think my cousin Ruth more beautiful," said Lawrence quickly.

"Well, I had no intention of becoming so personal," answered the other gravely, "but that is certainly my opinion. However, Miss Kitty is beautiful enough for anybody. Are you engaged to her?"

The plainness of the question staggered the

young fellow. "Well, no, not exactly," he answered hesitatingly; then very earnestly, "but I hope to be some day—it is the dream of my life. I hope to Heaven she will be my wife."

"That complicates matters, my friend, I mean as regards your future, very much," returned the other gravely. "It is giving hostages to fortune indeed. A prisoner, wishing to escape from poverty and homelessness, you are thus hampering yourself with a fellow-prisoner, as it were, who can make no effort on her own behalf. Trenck himself would have shrunk from such an outlook."

"That is true, indeed. Do you suppose I do not understand it?" inquired Lawrence reproachfully.

"I think you underrate the difficulties of such an enterprise. May I ask if the young lady is equally sanguine?"

"She is not," answered the young fellow curtly. "Her own unhappy circumstances, which you have seen for yourself, and for which there is no remedy, have depressed her. She has no hopes either for me or for herself."

"Yet she did not seem depressed."

"She was too proud to appear so in your presence; but her life, so full of sordid surroundings, is hateful to her. If I could only lift her out of the quagmire, and set her on firm ground!

But what you are thinking, I know," he added bitterly, "is that we are more likely to sink together."

To this remark Sir Charles made no reply; and his silence was significant enough.

"And what is Mr. Salesby's view?"

"Well—it is not of much consequence, you will say—but it is favourable."

"He reflects that you have a grandfather."

"Yes. He thinks I may pull off the long odds, as he would express it, but I am well aware there is not the remotest chance of it. My Uncle Robert will stand between me and all benefits from that quarter. I have nothing to hope for save from my pen."

"A sorry instrument, even though it be a steel one, to open that oyster, the world, with," replied the baronet. "Well, well, we must not be discouraged. You must pick out your *chefs-d'œuvre*—'prose and worse,' as Jerrold called them—and I will send them to an editor I know, who will at least give me his opinion about them."

"You are most kind," exclaimed Lawrence with effusion; then suddenly, "but I hope the opinion will be an honest one. I mean not merely to please me, or rather, to please you That would be a cruel kindness."

The colour came into Sir Charles's face, and he was silent for a moment. Perhaps he had

had some idea of bespeaking an encouraging verdict. "Well, my good fellow," he answered with a cheery smile, "it will signify nothing to you what the editor says if his opinion is unfavourable, for you will not believe one word of it. No young genius ever does. On the other hand, if he accepts your contributions he will pay you for them, which is better than all the criticism in the world."

"You do not really think that," said Lawrence doubtfully.

"I am putting myself in your place. I should think that if I were you. Indeed, I am not sure whether it is not so in the abstract absolutely. Of course, any critic worthy of the name recognises rubbish as worthless; but when there is merit how can he recognise *that* in a work in a single reading, as the man does who has spent weeks and months over it? It is true I am no guide to letters; but in a parallel case, that of our own nature, I am well convinced—notwithstanding all saws to the contrary—that we know ourselves far better than those who call themselves judges of character can know us. We have ten times as much interest in the matter, and a hundred times the data to begin with."

"That is a new view to me," said Lawrence. Indeed, very many of his companion's sentiments were new to him. The man himself was a study,

and surprised him in many ways. His grace of manner and the kindness he exhibited towards himself were no doubt factors in his admiration, nor (though this counted far less with him) did his great social position go for nothing; but what most attracted him was the originality and naturalness of the other's talk. He had only known one man—of a very different kind, however—whose individuality had similarly impressed him, his old tutor, Mr. Percy.

They got home in time for luncheon, at which only Miss Jane, Mrs. Merridew, and Ruth were present. The master of the house never put in an appearance at that time, and Mrs. Robert, overcome no doubt by her extraordinary exertions of the previous evening, was indisposed, and required the attentions of her devoted husband. Miss Jane herself at the conclusion of the meal went off, as she expressed it, to "look after" her sister-in-law, declining to accept Ruth's services which were offered for that purpose. She even gave Sir Charles to understand that when anyone was ill in the house, it was her hand that was always ready to smooth the pillow; this, as Lawrence informed him with some bluntness ("she would be much more likely," he said, "to smother them with the pillow"), was not, however, the case. It was Ruth who was always the sick nurse; but on

this occasion Miss Jane had her reasons for leaving her niece at leisure; and the opportunity thus given to Sir Charles he was not slow to take advantage of.

"I trust your aunt is not seriously indisposed," he said to her, in a tone that was capable of being translated in earnest or in jest; he knew the character of Mrs. Robert's invalidism, but wanted to discover whether Ruth was inclined to be plain with him or not.

"There is not much amiss with Mrs. Robert," answered the girl frankly; "I wish I could say as much for my other aunt."

"You mean your Aunt Jerry—that is, Mrs. Lock," added the baronet hastily, "I owe both you and her an apology, but the fact is Lawrence and I have become such friends that I have fallen into his way of speaking."

"He would be pleased to know it," she answered graciously, "and I am sure Aunt Jerry would not be displeased at your calling her by her familiar name; she is one of the kindest creatures on earth, as well as one of the most harmless, and she is in very delicate health, I regret to say."

"I am sorry for that. Lawrence, too, spoke of her to me with equal warmth."

"I am glad of that; it was good of him; that is, I mean," she continued, with

a blush, "young men do not always take the trouble to perceive the merits of an old woman."

"Not so much as of a young one, at all events," observed Sir Charles, smiling. To this Ruth made no reply. Was it possible, he wondered, that the girl was piqued at Lawrence's indifference to her, or was even aware of his affections being otherwise engaged? It was worth his while to discover this.

"We have been a long walk over your beautiful country," he resumed. "I had no idea that Hillsland had such attractions."

"The whole table-land above the village is glorious," she assented.

"And the village itself is so picturesque," he added. "Indeed, one house, at which we called, seemed a little too picturesque; not, indeed, from an artist's point of view, but a landlord's. It was my old friend, Mr. Salesby's, 'The Corner,' as he calls it."

"Ah, that is a sad business. The poor man, they say, is on the road to ruin, though, I fear, by his own fault. What makes the thing so pitiable is that he has a daughter."

"Yes, I saw her to-day: a very pretty girl."

"To my mind she is much more than that: a most graceful and charming girl."

"Do you really think her charming?"

"So far as looks go, yes; I have never seen

her equal; but I scarcely know anything of her besides her looks. She feels her father's position —and indeed her own—I fancy very keenly, and that makes her disinclined for acquaintanceship. None of us see anything of her, poor thing!" Sir Charles thought of Lawrence's infatuation for the girl (for so it seemed to him) and could not restrain a smile. "You are thinking, perhaps," added Ruth, with a little blush, "that we have made no effort to be friendly; but, indeed, I have done what I could. She seems to resent any sympathy."

"I am sure you have done your best," said Sir Charles earnestly. "I was very far from thinking otherwise."

"She reminds me of Hillsland Beck, which you crossed on the moor to-day—

> "'With each cross and fall the prouder,
> Like a proud man growing poor.'"

"A pretty metaphor and a true one," observed Sir Charles, "but the lines are unfamiliar to me."

"This is not surprising," she answered, smiling, "they were written by Lawrence."

"And on Miss Kate?" he inquired.

"Not that I am aware of," she answered, laughing this time outright. "He writes on most things, but I don't think he has yet immortalised either me or Miss Salesby."

"So far as my judgment goes," returned Sir Charles, without betraying his secret amusement at this proof of ignorance, "he writes very well. He is to give me some specimens of his genius to-day, and I have promised to do what I can to get them into print."

"That is kind of you indeed," she murmured earnestly. "If he could only get a little encouragement, poor fellow, he might do something for himself. I feel, though, alas, I know nothing about such matters, that he has a great deal of talent."

"That is just my feeling, and also my state of ignorance," said the other gravely.

"But you are not ignorant; and you have power and influence. Oh, if you *could* help him to help himself! He is not happy here, at all."

"He ought to be," returned Sir Charles, with a little bow. She waved her hand as if to put away a compliment out of place; her look was serious and even sad.

"If you only knew his position here, you would think he had good cause to be unhappy. And then the alternative—that dreadful clerkship at Singapore, for which he is so unfitted, and the thought of which is hateful to him. If he could only maintain himself in England, how thankful I should be!"

"If I had not been interested in Lawrence

before," said Sir Charles earnestly, "the knowledge that you feel so warmly for him would enlist my best endeavours." The colour rushed to the girl's cheeks. A less intelligent or a vainer man would have set her emotion down to his own account, but the baronet translated it aright. Ruth had blushed, not at his willingness to serve her, but at the affection he had imputed to her for her cousin.

"She is in love with him," was his quick conclusion, "and he is not in love with her." It would have been easy to disenchant her by letting her understand that he was in love with somebody else; then her affection would be free to settle elsewhere. It would not be necessary for him to use any of those stratagems which we are told are fair in love and war; he had only to tell the simple truth. But this he hesitated to do, for the very reason that would have caused some men to take that course—because he himself regarded her with such tenderness. It could not, as yet at all events, be said that he was in love with Ruth; but it was not only her beauty that attracted him; her unselfishness, her frankness, her defiance of the domestic tyrants before whom poor Mrs. Merridew and Aunt Jerry crouched in fear, filled him with admiration. She might find out for herself—as indeed she would surely do—the true state of affairs, but he would not be the one to awaken her from "Love's

young dream." A chivalrous resolve enough, but at the same time he did not forget that the messenger of such ill-tidings would therein be far from recommending himself to her. The lover of fifty is said to be more vehement of purpose than he of twenty-five, but he is also more judicious in the manner of his wooing.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN ERROR IN A TELEGRAM.

The noblest study of mankind may be man, but it is certainly the most difficult. The general character of his fellow-creatures may indeed be diagnosed by the observant student pretty accurately. He is but a tyro in the art if he cannot, on comparatively slight acquaintance, distinguish the honest man from the rogue. "Man," says a modern poet, "is not wicked and is not good; by no means as white as snow, but by no means as black as coal; he is black and white; piebald." This is the case, of course, with the majority, though some of us—and not a few—are blacker than any nigger; absolutely without conscience, or tenderness, or any white spot whatever—blackguards; but, as regards the piebald ones, though their general disposition may be understood, their particular weaknesses — or worse—often remain unknown even to those who live under the same roof with them. The ex-Commissioner's character, for example, was read

pretty accurately by his son, who had given great pains to the study of it; but there were schemes going on in that bald pate under the skull cap of which he knew nothing. And on the other hand, though the old gentleman knew his son to be not only self-seeking and unscrupulous, but (what was far more deplorable) somewhat risky in his method of gaining his ends, he had hardly a suspicion of the desperate recklessness of which he was capable; and though both suspected the other's weakness (because it was common to them), neither had any conception of its extent. They transacted business together—the old man's business—almost daily, but now and then it crossed Robert's mind that he did not possess his father's confidence; that something of importance was kept back from him. He himself professed to have no business; his wife's money sufficed for him until in fulness of time he should receive the inheritance due to him by birth, and earned by filial duty of late days; but even when in conference with his father, Robert had of late shown himself *distrait* and somewhat neglectful of the matter in hand. "You are thinking of something else," complained the old gentleman, with irritation, as they sat in the study together, talking of leases and repairs; "what maggot have you got in your head now?"

"My wife is ill, sir."

"I never knew her otherwise," was the unsympathetic reply. "It is a great nuisance it should be so while Sir Charles is with us, since it leaves no one to do the honours." This was rather an unreasonable complaint, for, as we know, the speaker had no high opinion of the lady in question as a hostess, but the last thing the ex-Commissioner gave himself any concern about was consistency.

"Sir Charles gets on well enough," returned Mr. Robert with a sneer. "He seems to find an interest in Lawrence's society, which to me is inexplicable. The boy was conceited enough before, and this will turn his head."

"His head will be turned towards Singapore before the year's out," replied the other indifferently, "so that matters nothing. The question of more consequence is, is Sir Charles interested in Ruth?"

"Yes: Jane is distinctly of opinion that he is. They talk together, she tells me, upon poetry and such like, which it seems is a good sign. If the girl had the right sort of wits, she could easily lure him, or at all events put him in a position where I could bring him to book."

"I don't understand you, Robert," exclaimed the old gentleman hotly. "That is not the way to speak of my son Cyril's—your eldest brother's—daughter. Do you suppose that I

wish Ruth to figure in an action for breach of promise?"

"Well, it would never come to that, of course; but if Sir Charles inclines to play fast and loose with her, I think he should be made to pay for it; it would be only right—and also most particularly convenient."

The last words had probably some reference to what they had been talking of before, for the other answered irascibly enough indeed, but not contentiously ——

"At all events, see that our guest has his own way in this house. Though it may not chime in with your notions if he has taken a fancy to Lawrence, don't put a spoke in the lad's wheel by giving Sir Charles a bad opinion of him; and don't let Mr. Arthur Grueby show his nose here again while Sir Charles is with us. He has *not* been here since, has he?" added the old gentleman sharply.

"No, sir; he has gone to the Derby, which, as you know, is run to-day."

"I know nothing about the Derby. Horse-racing is a low and demoralising pursuit. In India our Cheroot Sweepstakes — "

Here there was a knock at the door.

"A telegram for you, sir," said the servant, handing the yellow envelope to his master. The ex-Commissioner knitted his brows at the superscription—"Stratton, Hillsland;" he did

not like his name and address to be thus abbreviated for the sake of three half-pence.

"This is a cursed piece of impertinence," he exclaimed, when he had possessed himself of the contents: "'Ganymede for ever—Grueby.' What the deuce does the blackguard mean?"

"I think the message must have been meant for me, sir," suggested Mr. Robert; but notwithstanding the mistake, and the wrath that it had aroused in his father's mind, "the squire's" tone was cheerful, and even buoyant.

"But what does it *mean?* I say," exclaimed the old man savagely. "Who is Ganymede?"

"Well, I suppose it's the winner of the Derby. Grueby is a foolish fellow, who thinks everybody has the same tastes as himself, and so he telegraphs what he considers will be interesting information."

"I don't believe it. Grueby would not spend sixpence to please anybody. You told him to do it, sir."

"I may have done so," said Robert indifferently, "but if so it has escaped my recollection. It was very idiotic of him not to have addressed the thing more distinctly."

"Idiotic? He must have been drunk!" cried the old gentleman.

"It is rather early in the afternoon for *that*," said Mr. Robert smiling, but in his heart he

thought it not impossible that the excitement of having "pulled off a good thing" might have been supplemented in his friend's case by a bottle of champagne at some other winner's expense.

"I don't like it," exclaimed the ex-Commissioner, in that judicial and condemnatory tone before which many a dark-hued native had trembled! "it looks to me as though there was some discreditable transaction in which you and he were both interested—gambling, sir."

"You display your usual acumen," observed Mr. Robert frankly, "though in a matter scarcely worth its exercise. If you will carry your mind back to the night when Mr. Grueby dined with us, you may remember that he talked of having a few crowns on Ganymede, of which he offered me a share. He seems to be almost out of his mind at the success of our little speculation. I believe I am the richer for it by *five* pounds."

"If that is all, and you have won," put in the old gentleman naïvely, "there is not much to be said; but you know how I abhor gambling of all kinds."

Mr. Robert nodded; he would like to have been able to say with confidence, "I know it," but he was not so sure about that matter as he wished to be. He had an uneasy suspicion that

the governor "dabbled" in things that did not always turn out Ganymedes. The rest of their interview was much more agreeable than at one time it had promised to be. Mr. Robert was more dutiful in his manner even than usual, and found more frequent occasions to admire his father's sagacity. He spoke of the pleasure Sir Charles had derived from his inspection of the ex-Commissioner's Indian treasures; "I can hardly get him to talk of anything else."

"Really now, indeed," said the old gentleman, emitting little purrs of satisfaction, that alternated with the hubble-bubble of his pipe. "Which do you think took his fancy most?"

"I think the tulwar of the Rajah of Bundlecumbad; the scabbard he described as a triumph of Eastern decoration."

"If I have a favourite relic of the gorgeous East it is that tulwar," murmured the old gentleman.

Still, when their talk was over, Mr. Robert was more glad than usual to get away; he did not look so cast down about his wife as he had done, and instead of going straight to her sick room, as might have been expected, he took up his hat and walked into the village. "Of course it's all right," he muttered gaily to himself, "but I'll just look in at Salesby's and get the news confirmed."

It was not a small matter that could bring a

smile that was not a sneering one into Robert Stratton's face, but it wore one now; it was not, it is true, of a very sunny nature, far less of that pleasant kind that evokes its fellow from whomsoever we foregather with, but it evinced at least a comfortable self-satisfaction, such as any man might wear who has enriched himself at somebody else's expense. It was not likely that he would find Mr. Richard Salesby in such high spirits, because he had always said that Ganymede was "not the horse for his money," but he was sure to have had a "wire" from Epsom, whether the news was bad or good.

As the squire drew near "The Corner," he perceived its proprietor leaning over the garden gate in talk with Lawrence. His brow grew dark in a moment; he hated to see grown men talking to the boy as if he were their equal, and even, as in this case, treating him with a certain consideration. Aware of this, and reciprocating the other's dislike of his society, Lawrence began to move away as the squire drew near.

"What are you flitting for, lad?" inquired Mr. Salesby.

"Oh, *we* don't want him," exclaimed Mr. Robert, who had just come within earshot, "let him go."

"Speak for yourself, squire, not for me," returned the other roughly. "Somebody else

wants him here, if I don't. You speak to Master Lorry as if, instead of being your own kith and kin, he was your dog; he ain't your *pet* dog, that's certain." And the speaker laughed with that full appreciation of his *bon mot* that is felt by a man who very seldom makes one.

Lorry was not yet out of hearing, which did not tend to smooth the squire's temper; but it was obviously injudicious to quarrel with his sporting friend till he had furnished him with the information of which he was in search.

"I am glad to see you in a joking mood, Mr. Salesby, this afternoon. I was afraid, perhaps, that the news from Epsom might have cast you down a bit."

"Thank you, squire; I strive to stand up against it," returned the other with a wave of his hand, but even as he spoke he slipped and almost belied his words by coming to the ground. Loosing his hold upon the gate to indulge in gesticulation had been an imprudence; for the fact was that Mr. Salesby was drunk. Mr. Robert perceived it without the regret that should have been aroused by such discovery; indeed, he was rather glad of it, because it corroborated his telegram. Mr. Salesby, as he knew, had never been a believer in Ganymede, and the tidings of that animal's victory must have been bad news to him. To "keep his

spirits up" he had no doubt been "pouring spirits down."

"When did you get the wire?" inquired Mr. Robert, ignoring with a fine sense of delicacy the other's condition; he was not from a moral point of view exacting, and quite willing, if it had only left Mr. Salesby with sense enough to answer his questions, to forgive his peccadillo.

"Not half an hour ago," answered the other with some indistinctness. "Where's Sir Charles, where's Kitty, where's everybody? I want to tell 'em about it."

"Well, tell *me*," said the squire cheerfully.

Mr. Salesby fumbled in his breast pocket, and after a considerably longer time than it had taken in transmission, produced his telegram.

"Let me read it!" cried Mr. Robert, with outstretched hand.

"No you don't," answered the other, drawing it back with a lurch that made the gate swing and him with it; "every gentleman gives a public reading of his own telegram, all others are—what's the word?"

"Imitations," suggested Mr. Robert.

"Not at all, sir. Much worse than that. All others are frau—frau—fraudulent. If *you* read it, for instance," said Mr. Salesby with a gleam of humour, "it would sure to be fraudulent. Now listen: silence in the pit, silence

in the gal—— By-the-bye, where the deuce *is* the gal? Lawrence can't find her, *I* can't find her. Kit, Kit, Kit!" and here Mr. Salesby gave a really admirable imitation of one whose favourite cat has in youth strayed from his hearth, and who seeks to recover it by blandishments.

"Will you be kind enough to read the telegram?" observed the squire, with that unnatural calmness of tone which is the immediate herald of an outbreak of temper.

"Suttingly, sir. Tip, Tip, Tippitiwitchit. Devilish good horse, Tip, though with much too long a mane—I mean name. Tippity first; that's my horse. Salt Fish second, Parsnips next, which is just as it should be; and then that very overrated animal, as I always told you, Ganymede. The rest not placed."

"That's all lies, the whole of it," exclaimed the squire furiously. "Ganymede has won the race, I have a telegram from Grueby to say so."

"Let me look at it," cried Salesby, roused to consciousness and even intelligence by this amazing statement.

"There you see, it's clear enough," insisted Mr. Robert, 'Ganymede for ever.' That must mean that he has won. What else can it mean."

Mr. Salesby burst out laughing. "Well, it means that the passon's (parson's) drunk.

Dreadful thing, drink, in a passon. What he meant to write was, 'Ganymede four,' for fourth he is, and no mistake about it, only his scrawl was so shaky that the telegraph clerk thought it was 'for ever.' There, come in and take a sup of whiskey," he added, with a touch of sympathy. "You look down in the mouth, squire."

CHAPTER XVII.

A NARROW ESCAPE.

The poet tells us that "A sorrow's crown of sorrows is remembering happier things," but even a bard's experience is limited; if he had been connected with the turf he would probably have placed the losing of a huge sum of money, when he thought he had "pulled off" a still larger one, at the summit of human woes. This was precisely what had happened to Mr. Robert Stratton. He had stood to win £20,000 on Ganymede (for, unlike his confederate, Mr. Grueby, he didn't bet in half-crowns), and fondly imagined he had done it; whereas Ganymede had in fact lost him £5,000. Only one person in the world had the least suspicion of the magnitude of his "transactions" in horse-flesh, but when he refused Mr. Salesby's offer of liquid refreshment, and strode away with something very like a curse, that gentleman's suspicions were excited. A man must be very hard hit, indeed, he thought, to turn his back upon old

whiskey; a thing he had never done himself under the most untoward circumstances. He might have invoked his bottle in (almost) the same words as the lover of music addressed to his pianoforte:—

"Dear friend, whom grave or gay we seek,
Heaven-holding shrine;
I pull thy cork and hear it squeak,
And peace is mine.
No fairy casket full of bliss
Outvalues thee,
Love only wakened with a kiss
More sweet may be."

As he leant over his garden gate and watched the squire's retreating form, this rustic moralist shook his head; he had won a good stake on Tippitiwitchit, and could afford to pity a fellow-creature. Besides his winnings, Mr. Salesby had another subject for satisfaction that morning; not, indeed, a very solid one, but which had been at all events "an excuse for a glass." He dwelt upon it now in a dreamy, not to say a boozy way, and winked and winked again over it with extraordinary sagacity; and this too led his cheerful mind to pity. "Poor Lorry, what a dog's life the squire leads him! He'll be harder upon him than ever, now that he has to fork out this pot of money. It is not two-and-sixpence that he has lost this time, I'll bet a penny. The lad's chance of getting anything

out of that oriental old scarecrow (thus he spoke of the ex-High Commissioner) will be next to nothing. And I don't envy the passon neither when he comes back and the squire has a word to say to him about that telegram, 'Ganymede for ever;' Grueby will never beat that if he lives to be a hundred." And Mr. Salesby gave himself up to such uncontrollable merriment as threatened to tear the garden gate from its solitary hinge.

The circumstance in question affected Mr. Robert Stratton in a very different manner. He shook, but certainly not with mirth, and, though Mr. Grueby was more particularly in his thoughts, he swore at large. His loss, great as it was, had come upon the back of other losses, which he had fondly hoped his venture upon Ganymede would have recouped, nor had they been half-crown losses, as Mr. Salesby had called them. He could not settle this debt of honour without appealing for help to his father or to his wife, who were equally ignorant of his speculations. The ex-Commissioner was not one who parted with his money very readily, even for the best of objects; if his purse was long his temper was short. As for Mrs. Robert, her money had been settled on her and her children by a prudent father, though it would revert to her husband in case of her dying childless. The squire, as Mr. Salesby would have expressed it,

was "in a hole," and he could see but one way out of it, such as only desperation could suggest. It was a wicked way, and also exceedingly dangerous. As he walked on with rapid but aimless steps, slashing the weeds and ferns with his walking-stick, as if he were cutting off men's heads, he came upon Lawrence, sitting on a stile with a pipe in his mouth, and looking very glum.

"What are you doing there, you idle young devil?" he inquired stormfully.

"Smoking!"

"If you give me any of your infernal impudence I'll cut your liver out," cried the squire, raising his stick.

Lawrence thrust his hand into his pocket, pulled out an enormous clasp-knife, and opened it with a click. It was plain that he was prepared for "reciprocity" in livers, and that Uncle Robert would come under the "most-favoured nation" clause.

"What is that for?" inquired the squire; not that he cared, but because, notwithstanding his fury, he shrank from precipitating matters.

"Whittling," replied Lawrence, and he produced a hunch of bread and cheese.

The witticism was thrown away upon the other, but not the coolness with which it was uttered. He was no coward, but it had suddenly struck him that the present was a very ill-chosen

time for a row with his younger relative, however successful might be the issue. Such violence should not go unpunished, but vengeance is a dish that can be eaten cold.

"Where is Sir Charles?" he inquired curtly.

"I don't know."

"But it is your business to know, sir; as I have already told you, you are placed at his disposal to make his stay agreeable to him."

"I am not in his service, nor in yours," returned Lawrence coldly; "as a matter of fact, however, when I went to look for him, as usual, this afternoon, I found he had gone out. I suppose over the hill."

The squire nodded, by no means affably, but to his nephew he seldom condescended to nod, and took the direction indicated. He had only a vague purpose in so doing; but in the desperation of his loss it had occurred to him that the baronet might lend him money; at all events he had the power to do so, which was something; £5,000 to him was like five thousand pence to another man; nevertheless he had a suspicion that the other did not like him, and things were hardly so advanced between Ruth and their visitor to incline him to do him so great a favour on the ground of future relationship. He walked for miles upon the moorland without meeting with anyone; face to face only with his dark and dismal thoughts. The song of the

lark, the coo of the dove, the wave-like murmur of the pines wooed his ear in vain; in vain the odorous air swept his frowning brow; in vain the landscape in its fresh summer garb stretched before his heated eyes. At last, when after a long circuit he had turned towards home, his far-sweeping glance fell on the man he sought; he was a great way off, close, indeed, to Hillsland, but he knew it was Sir Charles by his light summer suit, and Ruth was with him. Even while he gazed the pair had entered the last pine-grove beneath which lay the village. He could hardly have come up with them before they reached home, even if he had tried; but he had now no desire to do so; he had indeed lost the opportunity for which he sought, but his chance in the future was greatly bettered. Since Ruth and Sir Charles were walking alone together it was plain that their courtship had got on apace. He was glad that he had not thrashed Lawrence, for since the baronet had taken that inexplicable liking to the boy it would probably have proved an obstacle to the loan he had in view. What convinced him that the love affair was ripening was that when he next caught sight of Sir Charles he was walking alone towards the hall; Ruth, without doubt, had parted from him on the way to avoid any comment that might have been made upon their coming home together. Such delicacy of feeling

was hardly in Mr. Robert's way, but he knew how to appreciate it in others. If the happiness of his fellow-creatures could not be said to be his aim in life, he was not one to "spoil sport" when the game was being driven into his own net.

Before Sir Charles reached home he overtook his young friend strolling in the same direction.

"Hullo, my lad," he exclaimed, cheerily, "you look as if the rhymes didn't come luckily this morning. What's the matter?"

"Nothing; if I am dull it was because I missed your companionship. I found you had left the house when I looked into your sitting-room this afternoon as usual."

"Yes, I had a headache, and knowing you were hard at work with your writing, I thought I would take a walk over the hill. Where have *you* been? But there, I need not ask."

"If you mean with Kitty, you are mistaken," answered Lawrence with a blush. "I did call at 'The Corner,' but as it happened she was out; gone into the vale, her father said, about some poultry. He is in high feather this morning because he had won on the Derby."

"So Miss Kate may be an heiress after all, eh?"

Lawrence shook his head, the subject was too tender for a jest.

"I had meant to tell her how kind and helpful you had been to me," he said.

"You had better wait for that until something has come of my endeavours," observed Sir Charles. "I ought to have heard from our editor before this; he has had plenty of time to read the MSS. I sent him."

"Perhaps they have cast him into a deep sleep," murmured Lawrence ruefully.

"One good turn deserves another, in that case he ought to send *you* 'a refresher;' come, I should like to know what are your expectations."

"Expectations? Indeed, I have none, only hopes. A five-pound note would satisfy my highest aspirations."

They had entered the garden, and Sir Charles was making for a summer-house, which after his long walk seemed a convenient spot to pursue their conversation.

"That is a very modest figure," he said, "at which to appraise such a mass of MS. If it comes to no more than that I should recommend your giving up literature as a bad job, and appealing to the old Mummy——"

As he said the words Sir Charles found himself opposite Miss Jane, who, sitting in the arbour with an improving book on her lap, had most certainly overheard them.

"I must really ask your pardon," he

continued with his sweetest smile, "for applying such an epithet as I have just used to any relative of yours; but my young friend here so often calls Mrs. Merridew 'the Mummy' (meaning his mamma), or even 'the old Mummy,' that when talking with him I have—quite inexcusably—fallen into the way of it."

It was "magnificent," and if not exactly the truth, and indeed *splendide mendax* would have been a fit quotation for it—it had some *soupçon* of truth about it. Lawrence did sometimes call his mother "the Mummy" for love and euphony, but as an example of presence of mind, on the very verge of a catastrophe, Sir Charles's *coup* was perfection, and in that light alone it struck Lawrence.

He not only recognised the fact that Miss Jane would never have forgiven his friend for speaking of her father so disrespectfully, but that it would have opened her eyes to the alliance established between himself and the baronet against the Hall authorities. His gratitude and sense of relief, therefore, when he saw his aunt's grim face relax—for the familiarity taken, as she supposed, with her sister, by no means displeased her—and the puckers of her mouth form themselves into its ordinary wintry smile, were overwhelming. It did not occur to him at the time that such exceeding readiness of defence must have owed something to a habit of duplicity.

If Mr. Robert had been by and heard the baronet go on to ask after Miss Ruth, as if he knew nothing of what had been that young lady's movements for the afternoon, he would have formed a different impression of him. It was no doubt a praiseworthy satisfaction that Sir Charles took to hoodwinking Aunt Jane, but he certainly accomplished it with admirable skill. Even the severe Calvinistic volume which had formed the subject of her outdoor studies, and of which she frankly expressed her conviction that it was not much in Sir Charles's way, came in for its share of eulogy. A theological discussion, in which he took care not to be the victor, brought down the curtain, save for a tag, spoken by the vanquished to his companion, after he had left the lady's presence, "That woman, my dear Lawrence, has made a religion for herself out of the worst parts of Christianity."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE HONORARIUM.

"I HAVE got something for you which came by post this evening," said Sir Charles to Lawrence, as he took his seat and a cigar in the latter's room that night.

"Something from Mr. Latham?" inquired the boy eagerly; his face was flushed with excitement, his hand trembled as he poured out his friend's coffee for him; Mr. Latham was the London editor with whom the other had been in correspondence on his behalf.

"Yes, he sent you this," and he tossed a sealed envelope across to him.

"A letter; that is most kind of him."

"No; I wish it was, and that he had sent me the other thing. He has written me a letter as long as my arm."

"Oh, Sir Charles, this is too much!" Lawrence was holding in his hand what had certainly never been there before, a ten-pound note. His eyes were full of wonder and gratitude and

joy. It was the first money he had ever earned, which of itself is bliss; but he also beheld in it the promise of future fortune; the means of livelihood assured; and with it happiness and hope and Kitty. That almost transparent piece of paper with its delicate water-mark and cabalistic figures, was like the gift of some good magician in a fairy tale which endowed its possessor with all the wishes he longs for. It was the happiest moment of the young fellow's life.

Sir Charles regarded him with a humorous smile.

"Too much!" he echoed smilingly. "That's a remarkable observation for a contributor to make upon a *honorarium*. It's a lucky thing that Latham can't hear it. He would not be likely, if he did, to make such an error again, nor —on the other hand—is it probable that you will give him a second chance. 'Only this?' is the remark you will make next time, and 'Not enough!' the next. The appetite of the literary aspirant grows by what it feeds on. What seems ample to-day is insufficient to-morrow. I look forward with pleasure to the epoch of your dissatisfaction, which is as sure to come as daybreak."

"At all events, Sir Charles, I shall always be grateful for *this*," returned the lad with emotion, "first to you and then to Mr. Latham."

"There is no reason for gratitude to either of us, my dear boy," answered the other drily.

"To be sure I might insist upon a commission—and perhaps I may—but otherwise I am simply the intermediary; and as for Latham, so far as he is concerned, the affair is a mere matter of business. We should never waste what are called 'our better feelings,' but reserve them for some occasion worthy of them, and which their exhibition is calculated to improve."

Under other circumstances this cynicism of his companion would have amused the lad, but he could think of little else than the good fortune that had befallen him.

"Did Mr. Latham write anything to you about my—the—what you were good enough to send him?"

"Your MSS.? Why, of course he did. You've got the pith of the matter *there*. But if you care to hear his criticisms—they are not all mignonette and sweetbriar, however——"

"To me they would be priceless," interrupted the young fellow.

"Well, they are so in one sense, no doubt; it's advice gratis. I'll read you what he says with pleasure."

"'*Dear Walden,—You must indeed be almost bored to death.*' Oh, that's nothing; '*I never knew literature to be in your line before.*' Oh, that's nothing. '*To find you interesting yourself about other people.*' Confound his impudence, where does he begin about the MSS.; oh, here

it is. '*Your young friend's best things are his poems; which at first sight, considering his needs, would seem to be unfortunate; but it is not really so; for out of the young poet almost always grows the good prose writer. In the pictures called "In the Train," that of the "Mother and Middy" is capital.*' I am ashamed to say I forget it, Lawrence. Repeat, recite."

With a blush of modesty the boy quoted his poem:—

"'A widowed mother with her boy;
One that parts with her last joy
With steady hand and tearless eye,
And e'en finds speech for her "good-bye."
Grief and she are too old friends,
For least mistrust of the good ends
To which all trials, God-sent, tends.
By the voice that seems as though
Musicless it could not flow,
By the grace that doth appear
Still about her silvering hair,
By the fingers delicate,
Wealth or Ease was once her Mate,
By the weeds so worn and coarse
Theirs has been a long divorce.'"

"That's good; I remember the description of the boy," interposed Sir Charles, a little hastily. He was afraid of being bored, and still more afraid of showing it. "He was a good plucked one, just what a middy should be. Now let's hear the conclusion."

"'Boy and mother of that race
Meeting peril face to face,
Firm to friends and firm to foes,
On whose cheek nor comes nor goes
For shame nor fear, the blood-red rose,
Calm of eye and clear of head,
English born and English bred.'"

"'Pon my life that ought to bring down the house, Lawrence, or at all events the gallery. You deserve a pension for patriotic song, like Dibdin."

As a general rule young poets (and also old ones) do not like being chaffed about their Muse, but there are different ways of doing it, and that of Sir Charles was a very pleasant way. Lawrence well understood that it was solely for his own sake, and not at all for any pleasure derived from his verses, that Sir Charles was so patient a listener, and yet he was grateful to him, which showed him to be, if not a poet, something more.

"'*What I like next best,*' says Latham, '*is your young friend's description of the choice of a profession. The "Merchant" is good, and the "Yeoman" is good, but the "Soldier" is best of all.*' How does it run, my lad?"

"'Merrily clash the cymbals twain
With an exultant note,
Stirring sounds doth the trumpet rain
Adown its brazen throat;

Freshly flieth the pennant fair
From the good lance's head,
The stirrup's clank is blythe to hear,
Blythe is the charger's tread;
Fierce and clear doth the scabbard ring,
With the sharp sword for guest,
But the whirl of the downward swing
Of that blue blade is best;
And the tramp of a thousand steeds
In thunder and in cloud,
When the earth is shaken and bleeds,
Maketh a man's heart proud;
More proud than words ever said,
Aye, than songs ever sung,
And proudest the hearts fever fed,
Of the brave and the young.' "

"Now, that has go in it," exclaimed Sir Charles. "What a strange thing it is that one fellow whose heart is in Grub Street should write like that, and another should feel it. Set old Latham on a charger and he would fall off; he has never had a more deadly weapon in his hand than an umbrella; yet he writes of that poem justly enough: '*It stirs one's blood. It has something of the old ballad ring about it* (*those without an e*), *and is very refreshing after the triolets and artificialities of the modern Muse. It gives me great hopes of him.*' Luckily for you, my dear fellow, Latham is old-fashioned.

'A Pagan suckled on a creed outworn;'

he believes in Nature. Your 'Spring Time' has

'fetched' him. It has even fetched me, so that I remember the opening lines of it.

"'Summer's coming, Winter's going,
Sun has set the stream a-flowing,
Through our windows ere we're waking
Out from nests of this month's making,
Come the rooks' caws without number,
Preaching Work's more sweet than Slumber.
From the bare branch just set swinging
By the weight of his up-springing,
Trills the song bird, "I'm in Clover!
Spring's begun and Winter's over,
No more blowing, no more snowing,
Fruit's a budding, Wheat's a growing.'

"It is curious how spring revives the oldest of us, *gives* a spring to even the most worn-out machine. When Cicero tells us that there is no man so old but thinks that he will live a year, it is the spring that makes him think so. I dare-say you conclude that my old bones are dry."

"Indeed," continued Lawrence confusedly, "such an idea never entered into my mind."

"That's because you never thought about it; compared with you, no doubt I seem a centenarian. Well, they're *not* dry."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE INDIAN SUMMER.

At the time Lawrence saw no reason for those last observations of Sir Charles. They embarrassed him, and moreover he wanted to hear more of what Mr. Latham had written. He knew that Sir Charles was not fishing for compliments; that was not at all his way. There was a cynical smile upon his lip that puzzled him. What *did* he mean? A sudden thought flashed upon his mind. Sir Charles was alluding to a tenderness, which, notwithstanding the difference in their years, he entertained for Ruth. Perhaps he wished to break this news to him. This idea did not please Lawrence. The young always object to any amativeness in the old; such resuscitations are displeasing to them. They believe in the spring and the summer, but not in the Indian summer. Paterfamilias should be content to "go a-wooing in his boys," and not attempt those adventures in his own person. It is not decorous in him, and it is greedy. "He

has had his whack," as it is vulgarly termed, and should be satisfied with retrospection.

These were merely general considerations, and would not perhaps have much affected Lawrence, in Sir Charles's case; the baronet, though certainly advanced in years, was not at all like an old fogey; it would have been permissible to him, or at all events excusable, in his young friend's view, to have contemplated matrimony with some unknown damsel, however young, but he did not like the notion of his aspiring to the hand of Ruth. No suspicion of the kind had ever entered into the lad's head; he had not, of course, been made a confidante of the hopes entertained by the authorities of the Hall in that direction, and it struck him now with a sense of sacrilege. Of course, he might be mistaken about the matter altogether; it was the baronet's look and manner rather than his words that had awakened his apprehensions, but they were awakened. He seemed, somehow, to say to him, "However surprised you may be, my young friend, at such tender sentiments in a centenarian, still I entertain them." He was not a centenarian, of course, but he was old enough to be Ruth's grandfather, and the idea was not only offensive to him but repulsive, and even personally repulsive. It had surely no right to be so. What had he got to do with it, whose love was pledged—though the pledge had been

unratified by the other side—to another? Hundreds of young girls married their elders every year, in preference to their contemporaries, for rank, or at all events for sufficient reasons.

Age, it is said, is grasping and selfish; but so is youth. In Lawrence's case, his feelings could only be compared with those of the dog in the manger. He did not want Ruth for himself. How could he, when he had fixed his affections elsewhere? Yet he resented the possibility of this man's wanting her for *himself*. It was from no thought of her being changed towards him in case she became Lady Walden: no thought of his losing her affection, her solicitude, such as a man feels when his friend marries. It was something far deeper and stronger than that. It is understood, or at all events taken for granted, that a man cannot be in love with two women at the same time—a theory, however, that does not obtain among Eastern nations—and, therefore, a lover has no right to be jealous about more than one object. Yet what Lawrence experienced as regarded Ruth and this possible suitor of hers was, if not jealousy, some feeling extremely like it.

"Well," continued Sir Charles, "after praising your poems in this liberal manner, Latham, of course, goes on to say (as I forewarned you) that from a commercial point of view they are not worth twopence."

"Not *tup*pence," ejaculated Lawrence sadly, with stress on the first syllable.

"Well, he writes it twopence, but that's what he means. '*If your protégé*' (forgive me, that is Latham's unpleasant way of putting it) '*wants to get salt for his porridge he must give up verse-making, which takes up valuable time* (*even if one has a rhyming dictionary*), *and stick to prose. There are only three men in England at this moment who earn enough money by poetry to live on it, and Mr. Merridew is not at all likely to make the fourth. His sketch of Hills-land, with its mixed population of agriculturists and miners, is very good, and I shall be glad to print it in the magazine.*' Latham always speaks of his periodical as if there was but one in the world; it is never 'my magazine' which would imply that there were others, but '*the magazine.*' Keep that in your mind in all your communications with him, or your connection will be but short-lived. '*The story you send me is also good, but not good enough. This is only to be expected in so young an author, without experience of life, for which no imagination can be a substitute; yet from this very MS. I gather great hopes of him. It is flippant and shallow enough, but he has wit and a very good style of his own. I should not mind seeing the little story again*—i.e., *an improved edition of it. It is a pity he lives in the country; an old literary*

hand may do so, and write from recollection, but it does not do for a young writer. You confess yourself, my dear Walden, that you are becoming a vegetable, and you were animal enough——'

"Oh, that's all rubbish," interjected Sir Charles hastily; "old Latham is a Cockney born and bred."

"Still, how I should like to live in London," sighed Lawrence, "if it was but in a garret."

"Dick Whittington, eh, with your cat? Perhaps your ambition goes a little further, but that would come more expensive."

"I *know*," said Lawrence pathetically.

"I envy you even your dreams," replied the other gently; "My poor boy, my poor boy!" He rose and walked to the window, and gazed out on the glorious landscape bathed in moonlight. A good impulse, or at all events a generous one, was stirring within him. He had half a mind to play the part of a "little Providence" with his interesting young friend. But would it, after all, be for his advantage? There was at least one very good reason (known to himself only) why it should not be so; and there was also an objection to such a course—a strong if not a good objection—upon his own account. The mere outlay that would be necessary, to do Sir Charles justice, never entered his mind; he was always liberal, nay lavish, in matters of expenditure, if they consorted with his own

humour; if otherwise he could be granite. The impulse passed away. "Well," he said, "there is little more in our friend's letter that would interest you, except the enclosure; that is the price of the village sketch."

"A magnificent honorarium for such a trifle, indeed," observed Lawrence.

"I am glad it pleases you, though, as I have said before, any sense of obligation you may be feeling on that score will soon wear off. The literary mind—notwithstanding the reams of balderdash that have been written about it—is as practical as any other; Shakespeare was no more indifferent to remuneration than Bacon, though he was a much more honest fellow. The labourer is worthy of his hire, and even in the field of letters is aware of it. The gate of that field is now open to you."

"Yes, and I shall never forget who opened it," said Lawrence gently.

"It is kind of you to say so; perhaps a day may come when you may have need to recall the fact to excuse something amiss, or that seems amiss, on my part. It is only for that reason that I would bid you remember it."

He is certainly referring to Ruth, thought Lawrence, but this time without resentment; he could not just now mix up resentful feelings with the gratitude and joy that filled his heart. Still, as Sir Charles had said, the literary mind

is practical. Lawrence had no doubts of his friend, was without the least suspicion of the impulsiveness of his character, but fortunately for himself, had the instinct to strike while the iron was hot.

"There would be no harm, I suppose, in my putting myself in direct communication with Mr. Latham, now that you have broken the ice for me."

"That is a better metaphor than you have any idea of," returned the other laughing, "for Latham is not a gushing editor. You must not expect him to write to you so encouragingly as he writes *of* you to me. He looks upon the contributor, though necessary to him, as a necessary evil, just as the barrister regards the solicitor; and though he can be civil enough, no doubt, to the well-known author, he is frigid to the volunteer."

"I can now understand how much your friendship weighed with him," said Lawrence, "since what has happened so far exceeds my own expectations; but if it was only to save you further trouble, I should like to be in personal communication with him. May I say that you have read to me what he has been so good as to say about my——"

"Works," exclaimed Sir Charles, filling up the hiatus of modest hesitation; "'the works of Mr. Lawrence Merridew, the well-known

novelist, will appear in monthly volumes at five shillings; a few large paper copies will be issued at one guinea;' I hope I shall live to see it."

"I am afraid you will have passed the ordinary limits of human life before that happens," said Lawrence with a sigh.

"That observation is not complimentary to either of us," returned the baronet drily. It really seemed as if the subject of age was an unwelcome one to him. Of course, Lawrence knew that it was so even with otherwise sensible men; but Sir Charles had seemed to him so superior to all such weaknesses.

There was a long pause.

"I am sorry to hear that you have a second invalid in the house," said Sir Charles, after a time. "Miss Ruth tells me that Mrs. Lock is seriously indisposed."

"Yes; poor Aunt Jerry, I fear, is a great deal worse than Mrs. Robert," said Lawrence, "though not half so much fuss is made about her. Except my mother and Ruth, everybody takes her illness very coolly. It is one of the disadvantages of not being an heiress."

"And yet Mrs. Lock was very well off at one time," observed Sir Charles.

"So I have heard; but she has nothing now. If Uncle Robert thinks of her at all, he is probably calculating how cheaply she can be buried."

"It seems to me you are what an emotional philosopher has described as 'a good hater,' Master Lawrence."

"So would you be, if you were in my place," answered Lawrence.

"I suppose so," returned the other smiling. It was difficult, perhaps impossible, for him to picture himself in his companion's position; though in some respects equals, they were almost at the extreme ends of the social chain.

Though Lawrence resented the indifference of his relatives to Aunt Jerry's indisposition, he himself regarded it with philosophy. There was not only no sympathy between them, but he had a suspicion that he was not a favourite with the old lady.

As regarded the feelings of his fellow-creatures, he was as sensitive to heat and cold as a thermometer; and if he could have been present at a little scene that was going on at that very moment only a few doors from his own room he would have had his views on the matter in question corroborated.

CHAPTER XX.

AUNT JERRY.

In a bedroom of ample proportions, but poorly furnished, lay an old woman on what, to judge by the white and weary face, the pinched features, the attenuated frame, and the voice that hardly rose to whisper pitch, should have been her deathbed; but her cavernous eyes had lustre in them still, and though her speech was low, it was sustained, and had none of those gasps and blanks in it that herald the eternal silence. Aunt Jerry was ill, no doubt, but, as her brother had cheerfully remarked to her when speaking of the fact, she was "worth a couple of dead 'uns yet." The observation, no doubt intended as a tonic, had effected no improvement in her condition, but there was some truth in it. Why, being so worn and weak, and having no solid reason so far as any enjoyment of it was concerned to cling to life, she should have still continued to do so, was a question that might have been asked years ago;

but now so very ill had Aunt Jerry got to look that it had become importunate. It even occurred to her tender-hearted niece, Ruth Stratton, as she leant over her patient's grey head and smoothed her pillow, and rubbed her fevered forehead with eau de Cologne. How can this Damocles' sword, which almost visibly hangs over this unhappy woman, have for her anything of menace? Perhaps it has not; but on the other hand she has no desire to die. She has just told the doctor so, who has replied "quite right" in a very encouraging manner, and has since informed Miss Jane of the circumstance as reflecting credit upon the family; "that inherent determination of the Strattons which she shares with the rest of you," he had said, "will keep her alive, madam—well—for some days."

"I hope so, indeed," replied Miss Jane, with genuine feeling and regret that the report had not been even more favourable, since "if anything happened" to Aunt Jerry—such influences have the slightest causes upon affairs of real moment—it would be necessary for their guest to leave the Hall, just as everything between himself and Ruth seemed going on so nicely. But this consideration did not so much as enter into the mind of Ruth herself, which was entirely taken up with the care and comfort of her patient. These two presented a striking

contrast: the one, prematurely old, the bitter cup of life drained almost to the dregs, waiting but by no means wishing for death; the other glorious in health and youth and beauty, and attired in some diaphanous garb (for she had come straight from the drawing-room) that to the more masculine eye made her resemble a ministering angel.

"Ruth," said the old lady, "this must not be."

"What must not be, Aunt Jerry?"

"Your coming here in your beautiful clothes every night to nurse a poor old woman like me. Your uncle doesn't like it, your Aunt Jane doesn't like it. It's a waste."

"A waste?"

"Well, of course, it's a waste" (this with some irritation). "There is nothing to be gained by it. I wish there was, oh, deary me (her favourite expression), how I wish there was. I wish I could make you rich; rich as you deserve, then you would have millions. And, what is worse, you are losing your opportunities. This is the third night you have left the drawing-room before the proper time to come and look after me. This has been remarked upon. It is not hospitable."

"Hospitable? I don't understand you, Aunt Jerry."

"That is what they complain of. You do

not, Jane tells me, appreciate your position. Ruth, dear Ruth, my darling, there is now a chance for you to escape from this dreadful place. Look at me. Do you wish your life to be like mine? To be a dependent all your life upon bounty grudged. Your grandfather will leave you nothing, Robert will take care of that. At present you have your beauty; when that is gone all will be gone. To be old and ugly, poor and friendless (for *you* will have no Ruth to love you), is a terrible fate. He does not like your running away every night, Jane tells me, before he has done talking with you. There is no sort of excuse for it, she says, which is very true. It is not hospitable."

"Are you speaking of Sir Charles Walden," exclaimed Ruth, with a sudden flush. "What is it to him whether I go or stay?"

"Much, my darling, much; but oh, so very much more to you," answered the old woman. "It is you that I am thinking of. I care nothing about him at all."

"Nor I," answered the girl coldly. "No, I will not say that, because he has been kind to Lawrence," she added hastily; "but he is nothing to me, nor can ever be in the way you mean."

"Ah, that is what I feared; that is worse than all; you only like him because he has been kind to Lawrence."

"Why should I like him for any other reason?"

"Because love begets love, and he loves *you*. Yes he does, Ruth, in his own fashion, though you shake your head. I am old and stupid, but I can see that. There is a light in his face when you are present that is not there at other times. He is not young, it is true, not a boy like Lawrence, but neither will he change like a boy. There is the way out of all your difficulties. *Your* love will come when you are married to him: it does come so sometimes; it does, indeed!"

"My dear Aunt Jerry, this is idle talk," answered Ruth gravely; "if you were Aunt Jane I should say it was wicked talk. I will not listen to it. So far from it making me like the person you have in your mind, it will set me against him; I shall not even be grateful to him for what he has done for Lawrence."

"I wish you would not think of Lawrence so much, my darling."

"Why not?" answered the girl vehemently; "who else is there to think of him, except indeed his poor mother. I know no one—not even yourself—who has been so systematically ill-treated; so insulted, so wronged. Why should I not pity him?"

Aunt Jerry was silent; not for want of

something to say, but from the reflection, would it be wise to say it? She was not an intelligent person, but she had instincts—delicate thoughts even—that are often wanting to much cleverer people. Her view of human nature had been extremely limited, but she understood those she loved. Her feelings (a thing which is getting rare with some of her sex) were essentially womanly; she shrank from inflicting pain, even though (as with the surgeon's knife) it was for the good of the sufferer. At last she said, "All you say is very true, my darling, but Lawrence is not worthy of you."

The girl rose from her chair, with a white face. "You are ill, Aunt Jerry; you do not know what you are saying; or you are jealous of poor Lawrence."

"I? Jealous?" answered the other pathetically. "Well, perhaps I am, but it is not on my own account."

"Lawrence not worthy?" continued Ruth. "Who under this roof can be a judge of that? He is a head and shoulders above everybody. That will be acknowledged some day, when the creatures who persecute him have gone to their unhonoured graves. You do not understand his nature; you must forgive my saying you are incapable of it."

"I know I am a stupid, ignorant old woman," answered Aunt Jerry humbly; "I know that

your cousin has thoughts too high for me; but the cleverest are not always the best, nor even the wisest; they make great mistakes, my dear, fatal mistakes, sometimes."

"They are human, if you mean that, of course."

"Yes, that is it; poor humanity; I am not blaming poor Lawrence, mind; and besides, he is but a boy. How should a boy know copper from gold. It shines, it sparkles, and that is enough for him."

"I don't know to what you are alluding, Aunt Jerry—not that it matters, however." It might not matter, but the speaker was white to the lips. Her hands went up to her bosom, and stayed there, as if to suppress some inward passion. "If you have anything to say against my cousin—if you, too, wish to add your voice to those which cry out against the innocent—say it. Not worthy? Why is he not worthy?"

"I said he was not worthy of *you*, my darling," answered the old lady in a frightened voice. "Nor is he? Nobody is."

Ruth threw out her disengaged arm with a contemptuous gesture, as though she would wave away this empty compliment. "You said more, Aunt Jerry. Something about gold and copper. What did you mean?"

"I mean—it may not be true, of course, but

you ought to know if it is true. It has come to my ears that Lawrence is paying court to Kate Salesby."

"It is false," exclaimed Ruth. "The talk of the servants' hall. You ought to be ashamed to repeat it." Then with sudden calmness, "And if it is true, what right have you, what right has anyone to make it a charge against him? You are not his keeper. He is his own master. Why should not Lawrence——"

She dropped into the arm-chair and clung to it with both her hands. "Have you anything more to say," she added as though with a last effort of speech, "against my—my cousin?"

"No, darling, no; oh, deary me, how sorry I am. I dare say it is not true."

"And I say, that whether it is true or not, it is infamous to blame him."

"Don't be angry with me, darling," cried Aunt Jerry pathetically. "I thought—I was afraid—I did it for the best, indeed I did, because I love you so. It is only for a few days—a week at most—that I shall be with you. Oh, pray forgive me. If I were in Heaven itself and felt that my darling was bitter against me I could not be happy."

"I am not bitter against you, Aunt Jerry; but I hate backbiters and slanderers."

"Deary me!" moaned the sick woman; never did ludicrous ejaculation sound so piteously.

"I am not classing *you* in that category," the girl hastened to add, "and though I think you were wrong to have repeated what they said, I am not angry with you; I am only hurt."

"Hurt? Oh, deary me, to think that I should have hurt my own heart's darling," cried the old lady; "give me your little hand to kiss and say you forgive poor Aunt Jerry."

Ruth stooped down and kissed her, tenderly enough; but she was not the radiant being that she had looked but a few minutes ago. The glory of youth and hope in her eyes was quenched; the colour of life had faded from her face, and in its place was a marble whiteness as though a picture should have become a statue.

"I have done mischief," moaned the old lady; "harm where I had meant to help, my dear, forgive me."

"I have forgiven you, Aunt Jerry."

"You say so with your pretty lips, but do you feel it in your heart, Ruth?"

The girl nodded assent, and smiled an icy smile; not a glowing one such as she was wont to use, and one that vanished as quickly as it came.

"Then that is over, darling," put in the other eagerly; "let us talk of other things. There is something I wanted to say to you, something I wanted you to do for me. In my desk yonder are some papers. I want you to keep them for me; they must not fall into other hands when I am gone."

"What are they?"

"I don't quite know myself; but Jerry—poor fellow—told me never to part with them; so when he died, a ruined man, and Robert took everything else away from me as he did, I hid them from him."

"But if they are valuable I cannot keep them," answered Ruth.

"And yet I thought you said you had forgiven poor Aunt Jerry?"

"It is not a question of forgiveness," was the firm reply.

"I see," said the old lady quietly; "you are quite right. As I have left them—not that they are worth leaving, Jerry himself said they were worth nothing—in my will, it will be necessary for you to produce them. Please to keep them till the time comes."

In any other house it would have been a strange request to make; but even to Ruth her aunt's solicitude for the safety of her documents did not seem superfluous. She opened the desk and took out a moderately sized parcel carefully

sealed. "It has my name upon it already," she observed.

"Yes, that was a precaution against accident; I have always intended you to take charge of it; and now it will be safe."

CHAPTER XXI.

HOOKING THEIR FISH.

When Ruth retired to her own room that night with her aunt's parcel in her hand she thought but little of what she carried. She put it mechanically into a drawer of her desk, and, having locked it, gave no more attention to the matter. Aunt Jerry had given her something else to think about, which could not be put in a drawer or forgotten. Was it possible that what had come to the ears of the old lady (as she had herself expressed it) about Lawrence and Kate Salesby was true? That it had not come to the ears of others was natural enough, for the maids, through whom it must have come, would have been naturally loth to speak of it to Lawrence's mother, and certainly disinclined to do so to their own master and mistress; they hated them too much, and would also be unwilling to "make mischief" between them and Master Lawrence, who was a great favourite with them.

It was with no thought of doing harm, however, but probably the contrary, that they had told Aunt Jerry, with whom, to say truth, they were somewhat too familiar. She had never been encumbered with dignity, and in these latter days had become, in position, little superior to a servant herself. It was clear enough, in short, from whence the report had arisen; but the question which was so unfortunately pressing on Ruth's attention was, was it true? As she had said, even if it was true, it was no business of hers, nor of anybody's; so far as his affections at least were concerned, Lawrence was his own master; and he had not—no, he had not engaged them elsewhere. Ruth did not confess, even to herself, that she was in love with her cousin. A girl has not the freedom of a man in such a matter; she must not acknowledge that he whom she loves has won her affections till he has declared his love; and it had excessively annoyed Ruth that Aunt Jerry had taken it for granted that she did love Lawrence. But so it was for all that. What she had heard, therefore, had gone to her very heart. It gave her exquisite pain, but it did not rankle there, as it would have done had Lawrence been engaged to her and proved unfaithful; she had been spared *that* wretchedness; and, moreover, there was a mitigation of her misery in the reflection that Kate was not quite her equal; as regards family,

indeed, the Salesbys were among the oldest in the county, but in position, education, feeling, Kate was obviously her inferior.

It was amazing to Ruth that one like Lawrence should have stooped to such a girl. She wondered (in her woman's way, which is so different from ours) how he could have been conquered by such feeble weapons as a pretty face, a graceful figure; if, indeed, he had been conquered. On the whole, though the idea distressed her, she did not believe it, and she was far less angry with Aunt Jerry for believing it than for the depreciatory terms in which she had spoken of Lawrence. "Not worthy of her!" The compliment to herself that that phrase implied did not one whit diminish her dislike of it. Lawrence was worthy of an angel, and she felt herself far enough removed from any such heavenly body, whatever Aunt Jerry might think to the contrary. Even the old lady's affection for her was no excuse in Ruth's eyes. Such flattery, indeed, at her cousin's expense was hateful to her. Nor did she forget, or rather she now began for the first time to remember, that the old lady had dropped depreciatory remarks about him before; had hinted at his vanity, his selfishness. Vanity? Selfishness? How could he help being conscious of his superior intelligence? How could he help, situated as he was, a feeling of isolation, conveyed

to others and by them misconstrued? The first person who, qualified by intelligence to judge of his character, had made his acquaintance, had appreciated him at once. Sir Charles Walden had said, "If your cousin is not a genius, Miss Ruth, he is a near relation to one." The baronet's praise of the lad was so welcome to her that she forgot to be angry with him for having had Aunt Jerry for his advocate. The old lady's notion of his being in love with her, though very distasteful, gave her little annoyance, for she did not believe it. She attributed the idea to her relative's match-making instincts.

There had indeed been a time on the baronet's first coming to Hillsland when there had been that in his manner—she hardly knew what, but a something—which gave her some embarrassment. He had sometimes, even while he talked of Lawrence, looked at her, smiled at her, as if it were upon his own account that he was talking; his voice had sunk lower than it need have done, even when they were not conversing upon "the common enemy," as he called her uncle; he had paid her little compliments very gracefully, but which it had been nevertheless difficult to ignore. It was possible—though it had never struck her in that light till Aunt Jerry had given it such decisive shape—that Sir Charles had at one time been making love to her. But that it had not

been so of late days she felt convinced. There had been a difference in his way with her, though it was by no means a less friendly way. Indeed, they had grown more familiar—more confidential even—with one another. His manner was no less tender, but had become more paternal. She had never been the least afraid of him, and certainly not of herself as regarded him, but what little embarrassment he at one time had caused her, no longer existed in their relations with one another. There was a tacit understanding between them, but not at all of the nature to which Aunt Jerry had alluded. Had it been otherwise—had matters even been on their former footing—what had just been said to her would have made all future intercourse between the baronet and herself strained and uncomfortable; but fortunately this was not the case. She could still like him as Lawrence's friend without fear of misunderstanding. She could not now, of course, be unaware of the significance which, in the eyes of Uncle Robert and Aunt Jane, attached to such a "friendship;" but that troubled her very little. She did not hate those relatives as Lawrence hated them, nor, indeed, had she the same reason to do so, but she despised them even more.

When one of those opportunities of being alone together, which were constantly being afforded to herself and Sir Charles, took place on

the ensuing morning, the latter at once began to speak of their common topic, Lawrence.

"You have heard, I suppose, of your cousin's capture of Mr. Latham, the editor?"

"Indeed, I have not," she said, with eager interest.

"What, has he not told you? I should not have given him credit for such modest reticence. I saw him speaking to his mother this morning with such sparkling eyes, that though I did not hear a word, I am sure he was telling her all about it."

"He has not told me one word." Though there was no complaint in her tone, there was dejection in it. Sir Charles saw that she was pained, and pitied her: he was angry too with him who had caused her pain. "What a fool the boy is!" he said to himself. "What an idiot not to see where true sympathy is waiting for him, and to neglect this angel for a girl that —well, is not nearly so well suited for him. I'll warrant he has taken his news to 'The Corner,' where it will not even be understood."

Not a sign of this indignation, however, was to be seen in Sir Charles's face. "Well," he said, "I am sincerely obliged to my young friend for having permitted me to be the first bearer of his good tidings to you. Mr. Latham is as much struck by the specimens of Lawrence's talent I sent him as an editor of thirty years'

standing can be reasonably expected to be. He thinks quite as highly of it as I do, and his opinion is, of course, of much more consequence. He has accepted one of his stories—and even paid for it—and Lawrence is in the seventh heaven of happiness."

"I am so glad," cried Ruth; but her lips quivered and her voice faltered. "Oh, why," she seemed to be saying, "did he not let me share his happiness by telling me this news himself."

"Yes, Latham evidently thinks well of his prospects in literature — gives him great encouragement and even suggests that he should come up to town."

The colour left the girl's face. "And will he go?"

"He certainly seemed to be pleased at the idea. You must not blame him for that. It is only natural that——"

"I do not blame him," she interrupted hastily. "What right has any one to blame him? If I seemed to be sorry it was but a passing selfishness. We shall miss him so—his mother and I, I mean—and it will make his time so short with us, for he is to go to Singapore, you know, at the end of the year."

"But his hope is that if he goes to London he will not go to Singapore at all."

"Oh, that would indeed please him, and be

good for him, would it not?" she added hastily, as though conscious of having been too eager that he should be pleased.

"Yes, I think upon the whole it would be good for him; it will be well to remove him for the present from Hillsland, where in some respects—though not in all," put in the speaker with a smile, which Ruth would have fain ignored, "he is so unhappily situated; and better still, if it resulted in his permanently supporting himself without being indebted to his relatives."

"You do not say, 'or to his friends,' Sir Charles," observed Ruth gravely. "Of course, it is not for me to interfere in any plan for his benefit; but I fear you are taking some responsibility upon your shoulders, and that in his natural desire to escape from thraldom, he may not consider—the—the——"

"The obligation," interposed the other with an amused look.

"Well, no, I did not quite mean that: I am sure Lawrence would be always grateful, and that in your case bounty would be as little grudged as felt; but there are some favours which, though offered in the most unselfish kindness by the giver, and though they may never be repented of by the recipient, one ought not to receive."

She hesitated, and the more so since the colour had risen in the other's usually impassive

face. "I hope I have not angered you, Sir Charles."

"Angered me? That would be a difficult thing for you to do, my dear young lady, whatever you might please to say to me. It is very natural, and does you infinite credit, that you should look beyond the present gratification of your cousin and consider the loss of independence of character that might ensue from it."

"Yes, that is what I meant, if I could only have expressed myself, and also that Lawrence is so young, and has no friends in London, and we —that is, his mother and I—are so ignorant of the world, that we have not even advice to offer him."

"Just so; all you say is most sensible and just. But as to the obligation there will be none at all. Lawrence has no extravagant notions. It will be easy for him to support himself in a humble way by his pen without assistance from anyone; and Latham's people are very nice and will look after him—so far you must allow me to be of service—just at first. I have thought that over."

"You are kind indeed: but his mother will have her fears; and there is another thing: if Lawrence leaves us, even temporarily, his uncle will make it the excuse for quarrel, will set his grandfather against him, cause him perhaps even to be renounced and cut off altogether."

"I have thought of that, too; my plan is to invite Lawrence to my own house. Against his being my visitor your people will not have a word to say. It is not likely that they will trouble themselves to inquire what he is doing; and while supposed to be under my roof, he may be trying his luck in London—feeling his wings as it were—so that even if they fail him, there will no harm be done; he can but return, and go to Singapore after all."

"That is not very frank, is it?" said Ruth hesitatingly, "not quite straightforward?"

Again the colour came into Sir Charles's face.

"You know the people he has to deal with better than I do," he answered coldly. "If you think a bolder course more advisable, for Lawrence to lay before your uncle his little plan of escape——"

"Forgive me," she put in quickly. "No; that would be out of the question. It is easy to be conscientious when somebody else is taking all the responsibility off one's shoulders. I must seem to you ungrateful indeed."

She put out her hand to him with a sudden impulse, and he pressed it tenderly.

They both forgot for the moment that they were talking in the verandah within eye-shot of the breakfast-room windows. Uncle Robert and Aunt Jane were both standing there, and motives

of delicacy had not restrained them from making use of the opportunity.

"Did you see *that?*" murmured Uncle Robert significantly.

"Well, of course I did; it's what I've been expecting to see for a good many days," replied his sister. "It would have been hard indeed if all the trouble and expense the man has caused us all this time had gone for nothing."

"Oh —— the expense," said Robert generously. "You can't hook your fish without gear."

CHAPTER XXII.

KITTY IS NOT SANGUINE.

What had seemed so strange and even painful to Ruth—that her cousin had not been the first to tell her of the good fortune that had befallen him—had been to Lawrence the most natural thing in the world. He had wanted to tell her and to tell his mother also—he had hardly slept for thinking of it, and yearned to communicate it to all who took an interest in his affairs—but the very importance it had in his eyes made him feel that it was due to Kitty that she should be the first to know it. For did it not concern her more than anyone else? Was it not the very tidings, unexpected and beyond all hope, that would make the course of true love to run smooth? She loved him—though he admitted to himself less passionately than he loved her—and the sole obstacle to her acceptance of him had been a material one. She knew nothing—and indeed cared nothing—of literary affairs, and his idea of gaining a livelihood by his pen had seemed to

her little better than a dream. It was a disappointment to him, of course, that it was so; that she had no sympathy with his ambition, and valued fame at a much lower rate than the philosophers pretend to estimate it; but now that he had something tangible to show her—his ten-pound note—and the editor's encouragement to tell her about, his pretensions surely stood on entirely different and far firmer ground.

Directly after breakfast he flew on the wings of love to Kitty's abode. Mr. Salesby, who had been drinking his own health—though with little benefit to it—pretty constantly from the hour at which he had learnt the good news from Epsom Downs, had not yet come down, and the young lady was alone at the breakfast table waiting for him. She was not impatient, but sat with her pretty face resting on her hands, in thought; it was their pressure against her velvet cheeks, perhaps, that gave them unaccustomed colour, but they were certainly more roseate than usual; her eyes, on the other hand, were less bright than ordinary; they were fixed upon the not over white cloth beneath them in dreamy abstraction. It was not her habit to be so self-involved. As a rule she seldom gave way to reflection of any kind, as she had little that was pleasant to think about; and the result on the present occasion had apparently been far from satisfactory. She had been weeping. So lost was she in thought that she had

not heard Lawrence's step on the garden walk, and only by his opening the front door without knocking guessed who was the visitor. In a single instant she had dried her eyes, and as he entered the room was pouring herself out a cup of tea.

"What, alone?" cried the young fellow joyously; "this is luck, indeed; kiss me, my darling Kitty—why, what's the matter?"

He had passed his arm round her waist in the most natural way in the world, and was leaning over her shoulder to kiss her, when she shook herself free from him.

"Only that you've scalded me, and spoilt the tablecloth," she answered pettishly, but with a certain gravity of manner too. "I told you that you were not to do that any more."

"Did you?" he said with a pleasant smile. "Well, if you did it was under a mistake, my dear, and you will have to pay me back my kiss with interest. I have brought you news that will absolve me for fifty kisses."

"News? What news?" Her curiosity was excited in spite of herself. She had fixed upon a certain course of conduct in her own mind as regarded Lawrence, but there were possibilities which might alter that. It was foolish of her to have imagined anything of the kind, and she repented of it immediately, but for the instant his evident happiness and enthusiasm had misled her.

She had scarcely known what to think had happened. But, as sitting close beside her, with his eager eyes looking into her own, he poured into her ear his glorious news, she showed no corresponding emotion. She gave him her attention, and that was all. Even when he produced the ten-pound note, which, as the first money he had ever earned, as well as the earnest of future fortune, seemed to him wealth and fame in one, it awoke scarcely a ray of interest. But though his story failed in its intent, the manner of his telling it, and above all the contiguity of his bright face, and the touch of his hand as he placed it lightly on her arm by way of emphasis, were not without their influence. Though his arguments failed, their appeal was not unanswered; she could not prevent stealing a tender look at him from time to time, and this blinded him to the indifference with which she regarded his tidings.

"So you see, darling, that what you thought so impossible has actually come to pass," he said, when all had been told, "and nothing now prevents you from giving me your first kiss, as my promised bride, in exchange for this one," and he kissed her.

She jumped up from her chair with scarlet face, and a look in her eyes that was half anger and half shame.

"You have no right to do that, Lawrence, and I won't have it," she exclaimed with vehemence.

"No right? Why, that is just what I *have* got, and had not before," said Lawrence naïvely, for in fact it was not his first salute by many.

"You have got nothing of the kind," she answered, keeping him at a distance with one hand, while she pressed the other to her bosom, where indeed wild work was going on, and such as needed a pacificator. "There is nothing in what you have said, though, of course, I am glad to hear it for your sake, to alter our relations to one another. Do you suppose that we can marry upon ten pounds?"

The last sentence was much more confidently stated than the first; of the profits of literature she knew nothing, but as regarded the expenses of housekeeping she was at home.

"But that is only the first dip in the lucky bag, Kitty; there is plenty more where that came from, and Sir Charles has a plan in his head which will put the whole thing to proof in a very little while."

"What has Sir Charles to do with it?" she answered curtly. "I mean what can he do for you more than he has done?"

"Well, he suggested that I should leave Hillsland and go up to London at once."

"Indeed!" She resumed her seat, but farther away from her impassioned swain than before, and began smoothing away the folds on the tablecloth.

"Yes. I am to go home with him for the present."

"To Hurlby Castle," she interrupted hastily. "You?"

"It is not such a very great honour," he answered, in a tone of wounded pride. "I assure you Sir Charles himself would be the last to look upon it in that light. He has no other design, of course, than to do me a service; but he is so good as to say it will please him to have me as his guest; it is not a piece of mere patronage as you are thinking. As a man of letters I may hold up my head some day as high as he does. I wish I could get you to understand that, Kitty, dear."

"And how long are you to stay at Hurlby?" she inquired; she seemed interested enough in that question, though she ignored his remark about the social status of literary persons altogether.

"Well, not more than a day or two, I suppose. The fact is Sir Charles's invitation is only a blind; for I shall be up in town while my grandfather and the rest believe me to be at the Castle. I shall be trying my wings, as it were, and if I find that they will bear one, they will very soon be able to bear two."

"Did Sir Charles say *that?*" inquired Kitty coldly.

"Why, of course not. How should he know

how dearly I love you, and what is my chief aim and object in becoming independent? In a few months—even in a few weeks perhaps—I may give you such proofs of my fitness for the calling I have chosen that you will be running scarcely any risk at all in letting me call you mine. I had hoped that the news I brought this morning would have been sufficient to at least make you reconsider the answer you gave me the other day."

"I don't like risks, Lawrence; and I have had quite enough of poverty," she replied drily. "If my father happens to gain a little money such as your ten-pound note—it goes as lightly as it comes. I hate what are called 'narrow means;' I am not made for them; I don't wish to study economy all my life; to look after the shillings and sixpences; I like you very well, Lawrence, dear——"

"Like me!" he cried aghast. "You have said you loved me! And you do love me, Kitty? Come, confess you do love me just a little bit."

He hitched his chair closer to her, and laid his hand upon her arm beseechingly. She trembled and turned pale; and in hollow broken tones replied—

"I don't know what I have said. You think too much of it, whatever it was, and of me also. I tell you I am not fit to be the wife of a poor man."

"But, my dear Kitty, where are you to find a rich one? You used to reprove me for having dreams, and yet, I am surely nearer to their realisation, than you are to what you have in your mind. If it were a matter of alternative, I should not have a word to say, but to throw me over——"

"I have not thrown you over," she put in quickly.

"Well, to deny me hope, with even less than hope in the scale against me, to say you prefer a possible chance of marrying some wealthy stranger to risking poverty with the man you love—that is monstrous. Besides, it is not so certain—and that is the very point—that I shall always be a poor man. Why, when I came up here—to tell you of it first of all, before my mother even and Ruth—I said to myself, Kitty will have no excuse now; for that she loves me dearly—though not so much as I love her, because that's impossible—I know. And now—why, what's the matter, Kitty?"

The tears were rolling down her cheeks, but she dashed them away with both hands. "Nothing," she cried. "Here's father coming." And a little pink as to the eyes, and a little white as to the gills, and with a general air of difficulty as to the tie of his neckcloth, Mr. Salesby entered the room.

"You here, young gentleman," he exclaimed

coolly enough, but not ungraciously; "you're an early bird—after the worm, I suppose?" and he nodded with much gravity towards his daughter.

"I brought some news for Kitty. There is some little probability of my having a start in life, you will be glad to hear."

"Aye, aye; drop the flag and all together, there's nothing like a fair start. But it is a long cruise to Singapore."

"But I hope I'm going to London; though it's quite a private matter."

"Oh, oh, so *you* are taken into confidence are you. Then matters must be even worse than I thought they were. Daren't show ourselves at Tattersall's, but send over nevvy and representative to arrange matters, eh? Well, mind you look sharp after your commission, my lad, or the squire will bilk you. There's Dick Salesby's tip for *that* event. The eggs are cold, and the bacon's hard, Kitty."

"I am sorry, father, but you are very late."

"The man of means—that is with ready money—gets up when he likes, Kit. I only wish it would last. Yes, my boy; here is no doubt your chance; the squire will not dare to stand in your way with grandpapa, if you know his little secrets. I suppose 'Mum's' the word, or I should like to know how much he is in for."

"Indeed, Mr. Salesby, I know nothing about my uncle's affairs."

"Close as wax, eh? Quite right." Then Mr. Salesby began talking about the Ascot Cup, which to Lawrence was Greek, and even Hebrew. It was evidently no use to prolong his visit, and after an ineffectual attempt to persuade Kitty to come out for a walk, he took his leave.

It had been a most unsatisfactory and disappointing business. He had still no doubt of Kitty's affection; but it was clear she yet doubted of his ability to make his way in the world. He felt that unless he could procure some definite and permanent means of livelihood, she would hesitate to pledge herself to him. As to her father, he was not inimical to his views, but it was impossible to explain to him the ground of his literary expectations and useless to persuade him of the mistake he was under as to his relations with Uncle Robert. Indeed, it was better to leave him in it, since, for the time at least, it rendered Mr. Salesby more favourable to his hopes.

In a very different frame of mind from that with which he had started from home that morning, Lawrence sought the moorland with languid steps.

Upon its breezy top perhaps some more cheerful reflections would present themselves,

and at all events he was in no humour for society; the news that had been so good to him an hour before, seemed no longer worth communicating to anybody. As he reached the brow of the hill he saw a horseman coming towards him. If there had been time to have avoided him he would have done so—though he recognised him at once as his best and oldest friend—but there was no time, the recognition indeed had been mutual.

Mr. Percy, for it was no other than his old tutor, was already waving his riding whip, and uttering some cheerful salutation which the wind carried away.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN OLD FRIEND.

The Rev. Gerald Percy, rector of Westerham, the neighbouring parish, formed a strong contrast to his brother divine of Hillsland. He was one of the handsomest men in the Church of England—tall and well formed, with grey hair that curled over his ample brows like a middle-aged Antinous. He was one of the survivors of the school of muscular Christianity, and as good in the cricket field and on the quoiting green as in the pulpit. The only fault he had found with Lawrence, when he was his pupil, was that the young fellow's tastes had not been sufficiently athletic. He believed that wholesomeness of life had a close connection with the exercise of the muscles, and even instanced St. Paul's metaphors from pedestrianism as a proof of it. Our professional athlete scarcely bears out his theory, but it did not enter into his mind that a time should come when hardly a match of any

sort could be engaged in without there being "money upon it."

Though little versed in modern literature, he was a fair scholar, and a gentleman down to his finger tips. The Church was his wife, and his flock was his family, and a more unselfish being it would have been hard to find. His interest in Lawrence was a proof of it, for indeed they had little in common; but he had perceived the youth to be cast in an uncommon mould, and liked him none the less because of their points of difference. In one matter he had taken great pains with him, where difference, in persons of Mr. Percy's calling, is often fatal to influence, namely, in religious faith. Lawrence, though affectionate by nature, had the scepticism common to men of his peculiar temperament, and his tutor had treated it very tenderly; he even understood that it arose out of good ground, though the root might be unsubstantial and the trunk awry. Many a talk they had together over "Fate, free-will, fore-knowledge absolute," conducted on the one side with the most admirable gentleness and forbearance, and on the other with fire and freedom.

There was nothing which Lawrence would not have told his tutor of his innermost thoughts on these matters, so certain he felt of his sympathy, yet strangely enough there were other secrets of his heart which he would rather have disclosed

to almost any other man than he. He had been confidential enough about them with Sir Charles —to whom he would have been chary indeed of conversing upon spiritual matters—but to Mr. Percy he would not have dreamt of saying one word about Miss Kitty Salesby. Not that he was ashamed of her, of course, or of his love for her, but because the whole affair was surreptitious and underhand, and must remain so, no matter what arguments the reverend gentleman might (and certainly would) advance to the contrary. The same reason he felt must prevent him from hinting at what stood almost as near to his mind, namely, that expedition under false pretences into the world of letters in London. Unfortunately, it was with something akin to that very subject that Mr. Percy commenced the conversation.

"Well, Lawrence, my lad, have you taken the heights of Parnassus by storm yet?"

"Not exactly," returned the lad smiling, "*non omnino sed pene.*"

"Come, I'm glad you remember your Latin; but how near have you got to Parnassus? Are you writing for the Sunday papers?"

"I wish I were," returned Lawrence naïvely, "but I am happy to say there is a chance of my doing so."

"Eh, what? come tell me," said the parson, dropping his reins on the neck of his discreet

nag, and regarding his young friend very kindly. "You know that if I have not always approved of your aspirations I have always sympathised with them."

"I know that indeed, sir, quite well," said Lawrence gratefully. The slender barriers of reticence had been broken down at once by this appeal to his feelings; and he forthwith told the rector (what he had not intended to tell him) of his sending his MSS. to the London editor, and how they had fared.

"But how came you to know of this Mr. Latham, who seems to have given you encouragement, though you must not count too much upon it. It is Walter Scott, I think, who tells us that literature is a good walking-stick, but a very indifferent crutch."

"Well, Sir Charles Walden was so good as to give me a recommendation to him; he is staying at the Hall just now."

"So I have heard," returned the rector drily; "and he takes an interest in you, does he, for his own sake, of course?"

"I venture to think he does, sir, since literary matters, he tells me, though he has an excellent taste in them, are not much in his line."

The rector smiled, not by any means in his usual genial way. "You have found a strange doorkeeper to the Temple of Fame, my lad."

"At all events a very kind one," put in Lawrence quickly. "But for him the door might never have been opened."

"Just so, and he has taken all this trouble—and he is a man who does not like trouble—solely upon your own account."

"It seems so. Indeed he has been so good as to invite me to return home with him next week."

"To Hurlby? I cannot say I am pleased to hear it."

"Why not, sir?"

"Well, it is rather difficult to say, but for one thing it suggests a family connection which I cannot but think far from desirable."

"A family connection?" exclaimed Lawrence with amazement.

"Well, you surely cannot be ignorant of the common report that links Sir Charles's name with that of your cousin."

"With Ruth?" replied the young man with indignation. "It is the silliest of all silly talk."

But even while he said the words the conversation of the previous evening recurred to him; the sensitiveness which Sir Charles had shown upon the subject of age, and the suspicion it had at the time excited in his own breast. Still, even now—though less perhaps from the unlikelihood of such a thing, than from its disagreeableness—he did not seriously think "there

was anything in it." "Why, Sir Charles is old enough to be her grandfather."

He had said that before to himself, and conviction had followed upon it; but now that he said it aloud, it did not appear so convincing.

The rector nodded an acquiescence, but so very gravely that the nod seemed to say: "And the inequality of age is not the worst of it."

Lawrence did not wish to enter upon that subject, his loyalty to his patron forbad it; but it was impossible to shake off the suspicion that the other had excited.

"Then you think that all the kindness Sir Charles has shown me has been caused by self-interest; that he wishes to ingratiate himself with me in order that I may say a good word for him to my cousin."

"I don't say that; I will not assert that I never heard of Sir Charles Walden doing anything creditable without a *quid pro quo*, because I never heard of his doing it at all; but I certainly think it unlikely."

The force and severity of the censure, coming from such a quarter, fell upon Lawrence's ear almost like a blow, but he instantly remembered the coldness with which Sir Charles had received the mention of Mr. Percy's name when he had spoken of him as having been his tutor, and it struck him—with some sense of relief—that

the two men must have had some personal quarrel.

"I am sorry you think so ill, sir, of one who has been so good to me," he answered sorrowfully. "I am under great obligations to him."

"He has not lent you money, I do hope," said the rector earnestly. "My purse is a slender one, as you know, Lawrence, but it is at your service, and it will be much better for you, believe me, to be indebted to me than to him."

"Indeed, sir, there has been nothing of the kind between us. The suggestion convinces me of your misjudgment of him; he is a man of the greatest delicacy of mind."

"Really?" There was a folio of sarcasm in that single word, but the speaker did not continue the subject. "And how long do you propose to stay at Hurlby?"

It was an unfortunate question. Lawrence had not the slightest scruple about deceiving his Uncle Robert or Aunt Jane, but with Mr. Percy it cost him a struggle not to be frank. "That is not settled, sir, but probably only a few days," he replied hesitatingly.

"Well, well, you will at least remember, if this new friend of yours should fall short of your expectations, that you have an older one, who, so far as he is able to help you, can be depended upon. It is possible that outside the regions of periodical literature—with which it seems this

gentleman has so unexpected an acquaintance—my advice may be useful to you. I hope you will apply to me, my dear lad, in any trouble, as readily as you would have done in the old times."

The speaker's tone was earnest as well as tender; it had also a certain warning note in it, as though he foresaw the trouble at which he hinted.

If he had not succeeded in setting Lawrence on his guard against the baronet, he had certainly shaken his faith in him; the young fellow's *amour propre* was wounded by the suggestion that Sir Charles's interest in him, if not actually feigned, was mainly owing to a selfish motive. Another shadow had fallen upon the prospects which had dawned upon him that morning so brightly. He had the artistic temperament at least, however he might fall short in other attributes, and was as easily depressed as elevated. He was grateful, of course, to his old tutor for his offers of assistance and advice, and expressed himself to that effect, but it was evident enough that he wished they—or rather the suggestion that they might be needed—had never been made.

"You are coming on to the Hall, I hope," said Lawrence, it must be owned with no great enthusiasm of welcome.

"No, my lad, no; not while you have

company there. Besides, I have business at the mines. Remember what I have said, and whatever you do, or wherever you go, God bless you, my lad."

And the rector laid his hand upon his old pupil's head as though to accentuate the benediction.

It was certainly very unfortunate, reflected Lawrence, as he turned towards home, that the only two men in the world whom he could call his friends were on such bad terms with one another.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN CHURCH.

That Saturday evening was the first one since Sir Charles's arrival at the Hall that he failed to come to Lawrence's room with his little portmanteau full of cigarsin the evening. Perhaps he had got a little tired of conversing upon a young man's literary prospects in London, and at all events there was excuse enough in the fact that Lawrence and he were both bound for Hurlby Castle on the Monday, and would have plenty of time there for conversation. Far from any objection to the baronet's invitation having been raised by Uncle Robert, he had received the news with effusion; as for setting it down to any regard entertained by Sir Charles for the lad himself, he had even less belief in it than Mr. Percy, and attributed it to the self-same cause. The man, he thought, must be pretty far gone with Miss Ruth, since merely to please her he had shown such civility to her young cub of a cousin. The news, indeed, pleased him

immensely, since it gave him ground for believing that the same tender motive would induce his guest to accommodate him with that little loan which his ill-luck on the turf had rendered so absolutely necessary. What was £5,000 to a man of Sir Charles's wealth? Let alone the pleasure it must give him to have the opportunity of obliging a gentleman about to be so nearly connected with him by family ties.

The conviction, however, that this little matter would be happily settled did not prevent the squire from bemoaning his ill-fortune, and cursing his friend the parson for having caused him by his slipshod telegram to believe for the moment that he had won instead of lost. None of us are thankful for the brief hour of happiness caused by a mistake of that nature, but are rather prone to dwell upon the disappointment that follows. But for the vicar, the squire would never have made a fool of himself in visiting Mr. Salesby and involuntarily making him the confidant of his trouble; of the magnitude of this mistake, indeed, he had probably no conception, but he felt the importance of keeping the matter from getting abroad.

From the few passionate words he had dashed off in haste to Mr. Grueby, that gentleman would probably gather the squire's feelings towards him, and that he had not replied to them, or been in any hurry to return to Hillsland

till the week was up, was not surprising. Moreover, when Mr. Grueby found himself in "the village," which was his playful term for London, he always stopped there as long as he could, though, owing to the loss of his own "half-crowns" upon the Derby favourite, he was not in a position on the present occasion to embroider his holiday with the usual amusements. Thus it happened that the first time Mr. Robert Stratton beheld his clerical friend after their common misfortune was in his own pulpit at Hillsland.

The squire always went to church, as a duty owing to his position, though on this particular Sunday he was more actuated by the thought of what he owed to Mr. Grueby. Mr. Salesby, which was by no means so usual, was also there; he, too, was eager for discourse with the vicar as an eye-witness of those proceedings at Epsom which had terminated so satisfactorily in his own case; and Lawrence was there because Kitty would be there; so various are the motives that actuate people in their attendance at public worship.

Before service Mr. Grueby was not to be approached; he had avoided all temptations of secular conversation by shutting himself up in the vestry.

"I suppose," said Mr. Salesby, with a most impudent smile, to the squire when they met in

the churchyard, "that the vicar will take for his text to-day, How the race is not always to the swift; he must have Ganymede a good deal upon his mind."

The squire, who had Ganymede still more upon *his* mind, grinned a ghastly smile, which Miss Jane rebuked with a frown, under the mistaken impression that he was indulging in ill-timed levity. None of the Hall party who trooped into the family pew that morning could be reasonably accused of that crime, though their thoughts might not have been occupied as they should have been. Mrs. Merridew was thinking of her son, and whether or no he would ever again stand beside her in that sacred place. He had told her of his plans for the future, in which she had but little hope. It was true that she understood nothing of the chances of a literary career, but she foresaw that if he failed in it even that wretched offer of a post at Singapore might be withdrawn by "the family," and his attempt to better himself be made the excuse for their washing their hands of him altogether. She knew by "harsh evidence" that it would give pleasure to both his uncle and aunt to see the young fellow cast off by his grandfather, who, for his part, cared nothing about him one way or the other. To his mother, on the other hand—such different values do we set upon one another in this world!—the lad was the last strand that

bound her to the shore of life. Of his tenderness for Kitty she had heard from Aunt Jerry, but that matter did not disturb her as it had disturbed her informant. Aunt Jerry was jealous of Lawrence upon Ruth's account, which Mrs. Merridew was not. She loved her niece, and would gladly indeed have had her for a daughter-in-law; but she was less ignorant of the world than Mrs. Lock, and knew that such a union was entirely out of the question. Ruth was penniless as Kitty was, but her family would infinitely more resent the young fellow's engagement with her than with Kitty, inasmuch as a good match, from which moreover they themselves would profit, was expected of her.

Ruth, who sat behind Mrs. Merridew, had her mind fixed upon the same subject, but regarded it from a very different standpoint. The most interesting object in the church for her that morning, one regrets to say, was by no means the officiating minister; she strove in vain to fix her wandering thoughts upon the service: to keep her wandering gaze upon the Prayer Book. They would stray in spite of herself to Mr. Salesby's pew, where Kitty sat, calm and serene, to all appearance the model of a church-goer. Up to the present time she had awakened but little interest in Ruth; her ways were not Ruth's ways, and she had received her good-natured advances towards acquaintanceship with

something like rudeness. She knew that Ruth felt nothing but kindness for her, pity for her position—the life she led with a gambling and drunken father, and without one female friend in the world, was so certainly "on the down-grade"—and she resented it. She was not going to be "patronised" by any member of the family at the Hall, however harmless and well-meaning. There had even been a time when she had regarded Ruth with dislike and jealousy; she suspected her, quite justly as it happened, though upon the slightest grounds, of being in love with Lawrence; and though she herself had never had any serious intention of encouraging the young fellow, she was quite willing to be the object of his adoration, and preferred it to be undivided. It was a dog-in-the-manger like sentiment, but young ladies in much higher circles than those in which Miss Kate Salesby moved have been known to entertain it.

Her feelings, however, had since undergone a change; she would still rather have married Lawrence Merridew than any other man, young or old, she had ever seen; but her mind, as she had disclosed to him, was practical; she was still, after a fashion, in love with him, but she was not in love with poverty, and she did not believe in literature as the way out of it; his devotion, in short, if not absolutely unwelcome, had become extremely embarrassing to her.

In his presence she found it difficult to resist him; but in his absence tolerably easy to forget him. In her heart of hearts—if Miss Kitty could be said to possess such a sanctuary—she was glad that he was going away.

Of these sentiments, of course, Ruth knew nothing; what she was saying to herself instead of the responses, was "Is it possible dear Lawrence loves that girl? She is pretty, she has a beautiful figure; I dare say that a man, who knows no better, will think she is well dressed, but can a fine mind like his be seriously attracted by her?" Upon the whole she came to the agreeable conclusion that it couldn't. And then unfortunately she caught a glance of Lawrence's halfway on its road to Kitty, and with a twinge at her heart that seemed to paralyse her very being, came to the contrary opinion. Aunt Jerry was right then after all, Lawrence would be content it seemed with

> "A lower range of feeling,
> A narrower heart than hers."

It was a terrible reflection for her, and little mitigated by the fact, which had, however, by no means escaped her observation, that Kitty did not return his glances. She was fully occupied, as any young woman in church was bound to be, with her Prayer Book. *She* was not looking furtively about her to see

whither young men were glancing; but *that*, thought poor Ruth, might be only too easily explained by the fact that she felt quite secure of the object of her affections, and knew where *he* was looking—as one feels the sunbeam without turning one's eyes.

Unconscious of the surveillance that was being exercised over him, it was only too true that Lawrence strove and strove again to win an answering glance from Kitty, as an angler throws his line again and again for a shy trout. Not that Kitty could be said to be shy, but only resolute to take no notice of his attentions. Even when given to understand that they were purposely ignored, his glances circled round her pew like doves about a dove-cote, taking in all that the old-fashioned house of prayer afforded to the eye. They lit upon the Ten Commandments printed in old-fashioned style upon the whitewashed wall; on the row of leathern fire-buckets which hung from the cross-beams; on the tablets to the memory of long-forgotten magnates; on the sounding-board of the pulpit even, with its fringe of cobwebs; nothing escaped him; for even in spite of himself Lawrence Merridew was an observer.

In after years, when everything had altered with him, and his whole life was turning on an undreamt-of pivot, that last visit of his to the old church often returned to him with great

distinctness. For resent it though we may, it is the material scenes of our lives that remain to us, and survive to the last, while our hopes and fears, our beliefs and aspirations (which seem each in their turn of such monopolising importance), change or die and are forgotten. There is a well-known saw: "It will be all the same a hundred years hence," and though in fact it will not be the same but entirely different, the saying in its intended sense is a true one; only instead of a hundred years one may write ten, a space of time quite sufficient in most human lives for a complete revolution.

The only person apparently quite untroubled in mind in the Hall pew—for Miss Jane, though extremely devout herself, was very solicitous about the shortcoming of her fellow-creatures in that matter, and kept a sharp eye on the gallery where the servants sat—was Sir Charles Walden. He was very much "at his ease in Zion;" not in the least impressed by the circumstance of his being in a house of worship, but nevertheless interested in it, as a novelty. The bassoon—or rather the man that played it and seemed part and portion of this instrument—attracted his attention; and also the man that slept the sleep of the just in its immediate vicinity, and rivalled its performances with his nose. A smile flitted across the baronet's features at every whack of the cane administered by the sexton to the

schoolboys, who, seated on open forms in the aisle—dangerously subject to observation, yet could not resist cracking the furtive nut, and polishing the favourite marble. When subsequently asked by Miss Jane how he had liked "the service," Sir Charles had been within an hair's breadth of replying that he had been very much amused, but with his usual tact and readiness he had pulled up on the edge of the precipice and expressed his admiration of the choir, which he knew to be under her especial patronage. This happened as they were walking back from church, for no carriage ever left the Hall on the Sabbath day; Sir Charles and Miss Jane—the most unsympathetic couple that could probably be found within the four seas—leading the van, and Mrs. Merridew, Ruth, and Lawrence, bringing up the rear. These three, though sympathetic enough, hardly exchanged a word with one another.

"It is like a funeral procession," moaned the unhappy baronet to himself; "the chief mourners are behind, but I am the undertaker himself in charge of the body."

CHAPTER XXV.

SQUIRE AND PARSON.

The squire had not accompanied the rest of the party home from church, and if he had done so it is probable that he would not have raised its standard of cheerfulness. His thoughts, while his friend in the pulpit had discoursed upon heavenly matters—as well as could be expected from a sermon that cost him but ninepence; for he bought them by the dozen—had been grave enough, though of the world worldly. Had he been a penitent, moved by the eloquence of the preacher to confess his sins, he could not have been in greater haste to see him: and when the sermon was concluded his pastor found him waiting in the vestry.

"'Pon my life!" exclaimed the astonished divine, not yet divested of his gown (for the surplice was not agreeable to Miss Jane)—"This really won't do, Bob, it's not decent."

"Decent or not, it's necessary," was the cool rejoinder. "There's Salesby waiting for you in

the churchyard, and what I have to say to you is not for *his* ears. Let us go out by the back way."

The back way was the chancel door, which, as a rule, Mr. Grueby did not use for egress, but though by a longer path it offered a private way to the vicarage, and the two men now took advantage of it. Mr. Grueby's dwelling, though small, was of good exterior, and in other hands might have been made as pleasant as it was picturesque; but both inside and out it had an appearance of neglect almost as great as that of Mr. Salesby. Thanks to a former incumbent, there were still some flowers in its garden, and creepers hung over its porch and casements, hiding with their lavish growth the evidences of decay. They darkened the low-ceilinged parlour into which the vicar led the way, and until the eyes got accustomed to the gloom, concealed there too the signs of poverty and neglect. The room was barely furnished, and the closed windows preserved an atmosphere of stale tobacco from any contamination with the outer air.

"Your room stinks like a pot-house," exclaimed the squire, though he had been there many a time before without complaining of it; "why don't you let some air into it?"

"The window sticks a bit," replied the other —"There, now you've done it."

The visitor had seized the offending frame,

and pushing it vehemently, had opened the window, but by the unusual method of putting his hand through it. For the moment it seemed that the vicar and the squire had exchanged callings, and that it was the latter's duty to read the Commination Service.

"I'll ring for a sponge and some water," observed the host apologetically.

"—— your sponge," replied the guest, winding his handkerchief about his hand, which was bleeding freely; "let us hear your news and be hanged to you."

"It's no use your putting yourself in a passion," answered Mr. Grueby doggedly. "I'm not to blame that you lost your money, and I've done the best for you I could, though bad's the best."

"I suppose so; it is not likely that a fellow that could send me such a fool's telegram as you did could make a bargain with a baby. Well, what *is* the bargain?"

Neither the words nor the tones of the speaker could be called conciliatory; but they produced no increase of irritation in his companion. The recollection of what was incumbent upon him as a divine, and upon a Sunday, too, perhaps caused him to exercise a moral restraint, or perhaps he was secretly well content that that unfortunate affair of the telegram had been got over, not indeed quite smoothly, but with comparative ease.

"Well," he said, "Burnes and Jessop will give you till Monday week to settle all in full."

"Will they indeed?" was the grim rejoinder. "They will be so good as to take £5,000 of mine a week after date, and charge me no interest for it neither. Why, it's quixotic."

"I don't know about that," continued Mr. Grueby indifferently, like a man who is no judge of the sentimental emotions; "but that, they said, was their last word, and if the money was not paid by 12 o'clock they'd post you."

The squire brought his hand down upon the table with an oath, and unfortunately it was the wounded hand.

"You had *better* let me send for a sponge," murmured the vicar, when the storm had died away.

"And Lazarus, what has Lazarus to say?"

"Oh, Lazarus—I always call him Dives, you know, which makes him wild—Lazarus will see you through it, upon good security, of course, if the money is paid him in six months, at 20 per cent."

"Why, that's £500! The cormorant!"

"Begad, it's a thousand! I've got the terms down in my pocket-book. He says he knows nothing about per cent. *per annum*."

In a single sentence, and that a very short one, the squire consigned the whole Hebrew race to everlasting perdition.

"By all means," said the vicar approvingly, "but that won't pay the money, you know."

Considering his intimate personal relations with the squire, Mr. Grueby's manner was scarcely sympathetic. The fact is, "he was in a hole," as he expressed it, himself, and under these circumstances it is not unpleasant to some people to have a companion, or, what is better, to see a friend in a still deeper hole. The satisfaction, however, such as it was, was short-lived.

"As to the money," observed Mr. Robert indifferently, "it so happens that there will be no trouble about it. It will probably be sent off by to-night's post; but I shall not forget the manner in which Burnes and Jessop have behaved to me. They shall have a bit of my mind with the cheque."

It was perhaps because that very respectable firm of bookmakers was known to Mr. Grueby that this menace produced but little effect upon him: he justly concluded that the cheque would make up to them for any expression of irritation that might accompany it; his mind was monopolised by the information that there was to be a cheque.

"So the governor will come down with it, will he? Well, upon my life it's very handsome of him, and a thing I should never have expected. So the storm's over, is it? Well, I should never have guessed it to look at you."

"It will be over to-night, I hope."

"Oh, I see; matters are not quite settled yet. Now look here, Bob, in my little way I've been hit as hard as you with Ganymede. Just make it guineas instead of pounds—it cannot make any difference to the old gentleman—and help me out of *my* difficulty with the odd shillings. I've always been your friend, you know, and kept a close tongue; and if you will, upon my life, there's nothing—nothing—that I won't do for you."

The squire took his chin in his unwounded hand and stroked it, as his manner was when engaged in thought. It would indeed be as easy for him—or as difficult—to raise the guineas as the pounds, and the additional sense of obligation did not weigh with him a feather. Circumstances might arise—though he hoped they would not do so—that would make the vicar's help of consequence to him.

"I'll do it," he said, after a pause. "If the governor does not shell out, Lazarus shall make it guineas."

"Upon my life you're a deuced good fellow!" exclaimed the vicar, in a tone in which surprise, it must be admitted, mingled with satisfaction; "and, by-the-bye, how's your wife? I hope she has ceased to give you cause for anxiety?"

"Never you mind my wife," was the unexpected rejoinder, delivered with such vehemence

as to be almost ferocity; "and don't you go meddling with the governor, as you call him, or mixing yourself up with any of my family affairs; mind that."

The vicar looked aghast, as well he might, for never, surely, had amiable inquiry been received in such a hostile spirit. However, he had the promise of a loan, which made amends for much amiss in the way of tone or manner.

"I am the last person to meddle," he said humbly, "and only wish to be of service to you. And—why, squire, you're dripping with blood!"

Mr. Robert, who had been standing up throughout the interview, here dropped into a chair, as though the last word had been a bullet.

"Blood! Whose blood?" he asked in tremulous tones.

"Why, your own, of course; your hand is bleeding like a pig. Do let me send for a sponge."

"Brandy, brandy, you fool; I'm faint," murmured the squire.

This restorative was fortunately at hand; indeed, the vicar kept a bottle of it in the cupboard of the bookcase which contained his theological library. And the sponge and water were sent for at last, and Mr. Grueby showed not a little intrepidity as well as skill in removing the broken glass from the squire's hand under a

very heavy fire of imprecations. He had not expected him to be a good patient, but it did amaze this good Samaritan that the other should have been so affected by the sight of blood. "One would have thought," he said to himself, when the operation had been successfully performed and the squire had left him, "that he had been a better plucked one."

In this the vicar did not do the squire justice. Robert Stratton had plenty of brute courage; if it be true that a bully is always a coward—which at least one great student of human nature has taken leave to doubt—he was an exception to that rule. But though far from humane, he was human; and a certain thought which he had of late harboured in his mind, as a half-hearted host harbours a thief, "you may stay if you will, but mind, I know nothing of you," had suddenly presented itself before him in its very ugliest form and unmanned him. Even the "Fighting Fifth" was subject to panic.

When Mr. Robert had said that that little matter (of lending him £5,000) between himself and his father was "not settled," he had, to a certain extent, spoken the truth; for a thing can scarcely be said to be quite settled concerning which not one word has yet been spoken. Nor, indeed, so far as the ex-Commissioner was concerned, was it likely to be. The squire knew his

father's character very well, but the knowledge was not reciprocated. It would have astonished the old man exceedingly to learn that his only son—whose advice, if it did not lean to virtue's side, was always for prudence—was at heart a gambler. The gentleman of "the City" who risks his tens of thousands upon the Exchange, but holds up his hands with pious horror at the man who bets "a fiver" on a rubber of whist, is known to all of us; but Robert Stratton was of the opposite, and much rarer type; stocks and shares had no charms for him; he especially distrusted those "underground swindles," as he called them, mines; but he was devoted to the racecourse.

Thanks to the progress of science and civilisation, the turf is a profession that anyone can now follow without attending a horse race; you have only to "touch the wires," as the classic poet expresses it, and the bookmaker thrills responsive to the magic call. With the firm of Burnes and Jessop the squire had done an extensive business for years, but never on so large a scale as on the present occasion. Their threat of "posting" him did not of itself disturb him; he could have borne a good deal of moral obloquy without wincing; but such a step would involve disclosure; he would stand before his father in his true colours—his racing colours—and that would spell ruin. If he could not raise the

required sum within the week, he would have to apply to Lazarus. And, *here* again it was not the monstrous percentage that gentleman charged which frightened him; though mean and grasping, he was not a miser like his sister Jane; if he had to pay £5,000 it might just as well be six thousand; but where was he to get the securities to satisfy so exacting a creditor? There was only one quarter where he could look for it, and that at a terrible sacrifice; it was possible that his wife might help him, but at the utter loss of her respect, obedience, and confidence in him. She knew far less of his "goings on" than even his father did; from him he had concealed his character, or partly concealed it, but with her he had played the hypocrite from first to last.

The humiliation that confession would entail upon him was hateful to contemplate, and what was worse than all, he felt that he might humiliate himself in vain. In spite of her weak and affected ways, he knew that a vein of obstinacy ran through his wife's nature; so long as she thought herself to be the object of his devotion, and he retained her respect, all would go smoothly enough, but he feared, with reason, the effect which the revelation of his position—which involved that of his character—might have upon her. How would his "Popsy" like a demand from him for 5,000 guineas lost upon a horse-race? Her money was her own so long as she

lived, though after her death, in default of issue, it reverted to him, and she inherited along with her father's wealth, his love of it. If she did not understand its value as he had done, she knew what it had done for *her*, and had the modesty to perceive that she owed to her possession of it much of the court and respect that was paid to her. Her delicate fingers would probably hold their own with a tenacity not inferior to those of Mr. Lazarus.

However, the hopes of Mr. Robert Stratton were centred for the present neither in his father nor his wife, but in that honoured guest whom he believed to be panting for the distinction of becoming his nephew by marriage.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A FAVOUR REFUSED.

Though it is the fashion to speak of a person who has a great reputation for sociability and agreeableness with admiration, it is really only a few who appreciate him; and it is their testimonial, and not his talents, which win the general applause; to folks in general one man as a companion is as good as another. This was strikingly exemplified in the case of Sir Charles Walden, and his entertainers at Hillsland Hall. They had derived from his society not one whit more pleasure than he had derived from theirs, and supposing (as they did) that the purpose for which they invited him had been accomplished, they were on the whole very glad to get rid of him. The last evening of his stay was passed, though neither to their satisfaction nor his own, in the company of his host and his son, in the old gentleman's private room, to be admitted to which was an exceptional honour. Sir Charles felt that it would be bad manners indeed

to decline the invitation, and especially in favour of the society of "that slip of a boy," as his grandfather in a moment of condescending recognition had called Lawrence. Moreover, it was his object to benefit the young fellow as much as he could, and if this could be accomplished at the expense of his grudging and unnatural relative, it had an additional attraction for him. As he had a shrewd suspicion that the boy would never return home again, to suffer from his adversary, he altered his rôle, which had been hitherto to ignore him, and spoke with praise of his character and literary promise.

The two men listened in silence: Mr. Robert with marked attention, and the ex-Commissioner with incredulous astonishment.

"I am glad you have discovered something *in* the lad, Sir Charles, which has escaped the notice of his pastors and masters," he replied, with a wave of his hookah. "I have had some little experience in literature myself. In my youth I distinguished myself as a *précis* writer, and as an administrator, upon a rather extensive scale. My reports were considered (if I may be allowed to repeat the opinion entertained of them by the Government) models. Perhaps some of the talent may have descended."

"Perhaps," said Sir Charles thoughtfully; "though Lawrence's gift is not precisely of the same character."

The ex-Commissioner blew through his tube (as an elephant trumpets) in his cordial approval of this view, which hardly, however, went far enough. It was as though a friend had observed to Mr. William Wordsworth with reference to some work as to drainage, that it did not run on the same lines as the "Excursion."

"I was wondering," pursued the baronet with gentle suavity, "if the lad should really show any practical talent with his pen, whether you could be persuaded to let him follow that line of life. What is proposed for him at Singapore seems not very well suited to him."

At these words a yellow tooth, like a tiger's fang in miniature, emerged from the ex-Commissioner's lips and fastened upon the lower one. It was a storm signal that Mr. Robert well understood, and the warning glance he threw at his father did not escape Sir Charles's notice. The host was not unmoved by it, and exchanged at once what would certainly have been a denunciatory tone for a didactic one.

"When we are young, my dear Sir Charles, we seldom know what is good for us. There is no reason why this foolish boy should not cultivate his gift for letters, if he really has any, as well at Singapore as anywhere else. There are mails, I believe, at least once a fortnight. But as for his giving up the excellent appointment which my influence has procured him there, and

taking to a precarious and not very respectable calling, in which too he would be an expense to his family," and here he turned to his son, like one who is certain of having found an argument which would ensure an advocate, "I don't think that either Robert, who has hitherto had the management of the boy, or myself could consent to that."

"Let us rather say," said Mr. Robert quietly, "that the subject will at least require a little consideration. Your suggestion has come upon us, Sir Charles, as a surprise; had it originated in any other quarter, I should certainly have met it with a negative; but considering your great knowledge of the world, and also the compliment you pay us, in the interest thus manifested in our young relation, it would be discourteous to so dispose of the matter."

The baronet smiled and bowed. He quite understood that Mr. Robert had said "no" as distinctly as his father had, though in a more roundabout fashion. What puzzled him was why he should have taken the trouble to go round. He had expected to find the more direct as well as the stronger opposition from the squire, and not from his host, with whose obstinacy of character he was less acquainted.

"It is quite true, Sir Charles," resumed the old gentleman blandly, "that you can, as my son suggests, lay claim to a far greater knowledge

of the world than most men; but it is the world of England rather than that of her dependencies. Now, of those I have, perhaps, a larger knowledge. Its opportunities for a young fellow such as" (here he hesitated, and Mr. Robert had to prompt him)—"to be sure, Lawrence; my memory is not, alas, what it used to be—its opportunities, I say, are great and numerous, and let us hope he will take advantage of them. You see here, in my humble person" (the pride that swelled him, as he so described himself, was marvellous to witness), "an example of what can be effected in those regions by one who went thither without wealth or interest to assist him. I was always ready to lay my hand to anything; nothing came amiss to me; as the poet says, the lyre, the pen, the sword."

If Sir Charles's reflections could have been conveyed in speech, he would have said: "You remind me most of the liar: as to the sword, I believe you have never drawn one, but only the long bow (and perhaps a bill), and your pension:" but none of these sentiments could be gathered from his face, which expressed nothing but admiration and credulity.

"No, Sir Charles," concluded the ex-Commissioner, "I am afraid we must still say Singapore for my grandson."

It was clear enough from his manner that there was nothing more to be said on that point

by anyone else. The baronet was not disappointed, for he had expected no other result, but he was exceedingly displeased. He was not accustomed to ask a favour (for that was what he had done in this case, as the others well understood), and be refused; it did not at all disturb him that he had asked it upon false pretences, trusting to the view they entertained of his intentions towards Ruth. He had had such intentions, as we know; it was not his fault but hers that they had come to nothing; and he had felt no scruple in taking advantage of the error for Lawrence's benefit. But for its existence indeed, his interfering in such a matter as the young fellow's future would have been little short of an impertinence; a personal interest in the lad, however strong, would hardly have been a justification for it, but a personal connection with him in the future excused it. And now, though this pompous old egotist imagined that he had secured him for his granddaughter, he had declined to oblige him in what, by comparison, was so small a matter.

Sir Charles's pride (of which he had a good deal, and much more than he would have confessed to) was hurt; and his dislike of those by whom the wound had been inflicted was intensified by it.

Though the ex-Commissioner had no idea of retracing his steps, he perceived, by his guest's silence, that he had gone too far; and the

glances of disapprobation his son cast at him heightened his discomfort. That he entirely agreed with the determination he had expressed he was, of course, aware; but that afforded him no satisfaction. Robert evidently feared that he had given the baronet serious offence, and what was worse, he himself felt that it was so. It was a monstrous thing, of course, that a man in his position could not do what he pleased with his own, without being taken to task for it by an impudent fellow; but when the fellow is a baronet with thirty thousand a year, and one wants him for a grandson, his impudence is rather to be regretted than resented. The ex-Commissioner, indeed, was pale with rage and fear, and wore such a haggard look under his skull cap that Sir Charles afterwards described himself—to one who appreciated his humour—as never having felt "so near to Death" in his life.

Conversation among the three gentlemen languished, and it was felt to be a great relief by at least two of them when the guest rose to depart upon the transparent plea that his departure the next morning had to be an early one.

Mr. Robert insisted on accompanying him to his room in spite of protest, and indeed his offer was by no means one of compliment or dictated by the duties of hospitality; nor did it surprise the object of that courtesy, who thought it likely

enough the other wanted just to smooth matters, and rather enjoyed the reflection that he would utterly fail in doing so.

"I feel, my dear Sir Charles," said Mr. Robert, so soon as they were alone together, "that I owe you an apology for my father's somewhat curt behaviour to you this evening."

"Not at all," returned the other. "On the contrary, I feel justly reproved for meddling in a domestic matter with which I have no sort of concern."

"Pray do not say that," replied the squire, with genuine earnestness ("I do believe that obstinate old fool has driven him off the hook," was his private reflection). "It is a most deplorable circumstance, but the fact is that your young friend Lawrence" (and it was a proof of hate, indeed, that even at such a moment he could not bring himself to say "my nephew") "is rather a sore subject with my father."

"Then don't let's talk about it," said Sir Charles, smiling coldly, and holding out a very stiff hand of farewell.

"One moment," said Mr. Robert, closing the open door at which they stood, and putting himself inside instead of outside of it; "I should like to have a few words with you, if you will allow me."

"By all means; sit down and take a cigar," said Sir Charles. His tone was studiously

indifferent; but he was curious to know what the man had to say to him. That he wanted something was pretty certain, though not so certain as that he wouldn't get it: though he hated his society, the chance of an opportunity of playing this tyrannical bully, as an angler plays a trout, was gratifying to him. The knowledge that he was trading upon his niece's chances greatly increased his disgust for him. An appeal *ad misericordiam* was not indeed what he anticipated, but if such a thing was contemplated, the petitioner, could he have looked into the other's heart, might have saved his breath. On the other hand, could Sir Charles have looked into the squire's heart, and beheld the grim work that was going on in it, it is probable—though not for the squire's sake—that he would have been of a more pliant mind.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A LITTLE FAVOUR.

"With regard to the lad in whom you have been so good as to interest yourself," said Mr. Robert, with his shifty eyes upon the carpet, and a certain doggedness of manner, as of one compelled to speak upon a subject disagreeable to him, "I must, notwithstanding your protest, just say one word, in justice to my father. He has had some cause for displeasure—or, rather, let me say for disappointment—in the boy, which may excuse an apparent harshness of manner when speaking of Lawrence. He has done his best—or what seemed to be so—for him, with not very satisfactory results; and he has exerted his influence for him abroad, in hopes that he may succeed better than in England. This will entail a considerable expense in outfit——"

"Not if he has the same sort of outfit that he has at home," interposed Sir Charles drily.

"Well, really, if you mean clothes, and so

on, these little matters have been hitherto left to his Aunt Jane."

"Who naturally knows nothing about them," put in the other sharply. "That is so far an excuse for her. But Lawrence is no longer a boy to be left in leading strings. You, Mr. Stratton, who have been a young man yourself, should have understood how humiliating must be such a position. Even a less sensitive nature than that of your nephew would have resented it. Take your own, for instance. How would *you* have liked at his age to find yourself without pocket money or a suit of decent clothes? Of course, I have no right——"

"Nay, you have every right," murmured the squire, in a voice that he vainly endeavoured to render conciliatory. It was like the growl of a dog who retreats under the table because the time for biting is not opportune.

"Well, at all events, since you have forced the subject upon me, I will speak plainly. The lad is starved, as it were, in a land of plenty. There is money at Hillsland for every body but himself, and there is no opportunity missed of making him feel that he is a dependent."

"I will see that he has pocket money, and a proper wardrobe. Indeed, I have made such arrangements as were possible as regards the latter already. I had represented to my sister

that since you had honoured him by an invitation to Hurlby it would be only fitting——"

"Oh, pray do not bring me into the matter, Mr. Stratton," exclaimed the baronet warmly; "it does not mend matters to tell me that if your nephew were not coming to Hurlby he would remain in rags. The state of his wardrobe is nothing to me; but to be so treated must be a bitter mortification to any young man, and you know it."

There was cause for quarrel, and plenty of it, in the baronet's tone as well as in his words; he could not resist the opportunity of hinting, not very obscurely, to the squire, the opinion he had formed of him; but curiously enough Mr. Robert, never much influenced by "opinion," was not altogether displeased at the course matters had taken. He had persuaded himself that Sir Charles was not angry upon Lawrence's account, but on his own; and that he resented the lad's "rags" because they reflected upon the connection that he himself was about to make with him through marriage with his cousin. Indeed, it was the fact that the squire had spoken to Aunt Jane of the propriety of Lawrence's being a little better dressed with a view to his proposed visit to "the castle," only Aunt Jane had replied "No: if the marriage came off, of course the boy must have a wedding garment, but if it didn't, it would in the meantime be an

unnecessary expenditure." Mr. Robert made a mem. in his mind that an ample provision should now be made in this matter; a resolve that cost him the less struggle inasmuch as the money would not come out of his own pocket; but he was also prepared to pay something, and indeed a good deal, to put his guest in good humour. The big fish, it seemed, was landed after all. Still, the present conversation was neither a good omen, nor a favourable introduction to the matter the squire had in his mind.

"I hope," he said, "Lawrence will show himself grateful for your kindness to him, Sir Charles."

"The obligation, so far as his visit to Hurlby is concerned, I consider to be quite on the other side," returned the other. "He is a most agreeable companion."

"And I dare say you find living all alone at the castle a little *triste*."

This was in Mr. Robert's opinion quite a Machiavellian remark; he thought it might even "draw" his companion to admit as much, and hint that that drawback of loneliness was about to be remedied in a very gratifying manner. But it did nothing of the kind. The other smoked on in silence.

"There is a private matter I wish to speak to you about, Sir Charles," said the squire, desperately, and taking his courage in both hands.

"A private matter!" Sir Charles raised his eyebrows. "Really!" His tone was incurious, even indifferent.

"Yes; I have got a little favour to ask of you. With most people it would be a great favour, but in your case, I venture to think that, though of some magnitude, it will cause you no serious inconvenience. I want you, for a few months only, to be so good as to lend me £5,000."

"Really!" said the baronet again, in exactly the same tone. "That is a large sum."

"It would of course, as I have said, seem a large sum to most people."

"It seems a large sum to *me*," said the baronet.

"Well, of course, in a way it does; and if the loan was not merely a temporary one, I should hesitate to apply for it even to you. It would, however, just now, be of immense service, and I have immediate need of it."

"The Derby?" suggested Sir Charles.

"Why, yes; I had the best information about Ganymede—it seemed a moral, but somehow it did not come off."

"Things do go that way on the turf occasionally; let us hope you will have better luck next time."

"Well, no; I have done with it. What has happened will be a lesson to me. Never will I bet again."

"In that case the misfortune may prove a blessing in disguise," said the baronet philosophically, and flicking at his cigar-ash which was a very long one.

"Perhaps—but in the meantime—the disguise is so perfect that the blessing has the appearance of a disaster. I must raise the money somehow, and at once."

"And from what I gathered the other night of your father's sentiments, he would not, I suppose, be inclined to assist you?"

"He would see me—well, at all events he would not do it. That's certain. Nothing but the urgency of the case would have compelled me to apply to you for assistance. It distresses me to do so very much. To borrow money of one's friend, one's guest, is deplorable, still you will make allowance for my painful position."

"This sum is a debt of honour, I conclude, which you have incurred without the means of discharging it. If you had won you would have pulled off a very large stake."

"That's just it. I felt I was dealing with a man of the world, who would understand things." Sir Charles's satire had flown over his head; he imagined that an excuse had been made for him. "May I hope that you will lend me the money?"

"You may hope, of course," said the other smiling; "'hope springs eternal in the human breast,' as Lawrence would say—the lad is full

of quotation; but at present I can promise you nothing. When I get home I will ask my secretary, who keeps my banking book for me. I have generally a pretty good balance, I believe. If I can oblige you, you will hear from me by to-morrow's post. And now I am afraid I must say *au revoir*, as my night will be a short one."

He held out his hand, which the other seized and squeezed with effusion. It was like wringing a dry towel. Still the squire had some hope. He had not at least received that point-blank refusal which had been quite on the cards. Sir Charles had the reputation of keeping a very large balance at his bankers. He had asked for no security, which indeed was fortunate, since insistence on that point would have been fatal. And yet Mr. Robert was far from comfortable in his mind about the money. He had certainly not found his friend so "accommodating" as he had expected. If he could have looked into the other's heart, or even into his room now that the door was between them, he would have felt still less satisfied at the result of their interview. Directly he was alone, Sir Charles had thrown himself upon the sofa and burst out laughing. He was not in such a very great hurry to go to bed after all, it seemed, for he sat up smoking cigar after cigar, sometimes with a face grave enough, but every now and then the recollection of Mr. Robert's conciliatory

manners—when applying for a loan—occurred to him, and it always evoked his mirth.

"He is like a snob in evening dress," he muttered to himself; "ten times worse than in his ordinary stripes and checks." And he made up his mind that the squire might have as many stripes as fortune—or Justice—might please to send him, but not one cheque from *him*.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FAREWELL.

In the morning neither the ex-Commissioner nor his son bade farewell to their guest. The former, indeed, rarely left his couch till midday, and the latter sent word that close attendance on his wife, whose malady had assumed a serious form, would, he regretted to say, prevent him leaving her apartment. Perhaps he wisely thought that the less he and his hoped-for creditor saw of one another, the better chance he had of obtaining his loan; or perhaps he felt that the spectacle of his nephew sitting in the baronet's carriage as his invited guest, and full of reminiscences of his uncle, would be too much for his temper. If he did not get the money, he was fully resolved that Master Lawrence, when he returned to Hillsland, should smart for it. He hated the lad for his little puff of prosperity more than he had ever done while he had him under his heel, and to say truth he hated, though in a less degree, his benefactor also,

notwithstanding that his hopes were centred in him.

Aunt Jerry, of course, was in her bed, much more seriously amiss than Mrs. Robert, though no such fuss was made about it; so that the breakfast party was limited to the three other ladies, the baronet, and Lawrence.

Miss Jane was very gracious; it was important to leave a good impression upon their departing guest, and her face was wreathed in genuine smiles, for she was exceedingly glad to get rid of him. His presence had been a restraint upon her in many ways; it had obliged her to curb her temper, and especially to extend a certain tolerance towards Lawrence, the necessity for which she resented. Nevertheless, even on this occasion she could not help taking a parting shot at him.

"I hope," she said, "*you boy*, that you will behave yourself properly at Hurlby, and not give cause to Sir Charles to repent of his good-nature."

This was said at the breakfast table in the presence of them all, including Mrs. Merridew, who flushed, poor woman, to her forehead, but said nothing. Lawrence, too, went on with his egg in contemptuous silence.

"I don't think Lawrence and I are likely to quarrel, Miss Stratton," observed Sir Charles drily. "One can hardly call him a spoilt boy."

The adjective was equal to a folio of satire, and knocked Miss Jane "out of time." She glanced at the baronet in what was, to say the least of it, a very inhospitable manner, and remained speechless for the rest of the meal. But "when that boy comes back," she said to herself, just as her brother had done, "I will let him know what spoiling means," by which she meant (metaphorically) to imply that she would spoil the rod and not spare the child.

It was the first time that any observation had been made in that house upon the young fellow's treatment, and Mrs. Merridew snatched from it a fearful joy, which she did not dare exhibit. Ruth, however, thanked the baronet with her beautiful eyes, and when the two women found themselves alone with him afterwards they both expressed their gratitude.

"It will do no good," sighed Mrs. Merridew, "but it was very noble of you to say what you did about my poor boy."

"It did *me* good, at all events," said Ruth, with flashing eyes, "to hear you. Oh, would that I were a man, that I could tell them all what I think of them."

"You are much better as you are, believe me," answered Sir Charles gently. "Moreover," he added gaily, "it seems, from your aunt's example, that one does not require to be of the sterner sex to say exactly what one thinks of

other people." Then he went on to say that he would take great care of Lawrence (which they didn't doubt), and a number of other friendly things, which to those who have no friends are better than rubies. To Mrs. Merridew, in whom the design in progress for Lawrence's future was looked upon with natural apprehension, he confined himself to these generalities, but in his leave-taking with Ruth he was confidential enough. He had indeed (as has been said) been within a very little of falling in love with her, but that was over now; and though his *amour propre* had been slightly wounded in the matter, he felt not a spark of indignation against her. He not only admired, but, what was much more unusual with him, respected the girl. Strange to say, even her love for her cousin was a factor in his own regard for him, and in a vague sort of way he wished it a successful issue. That it was the best thing that could happen to Lawrence he well perceived, though, thanks to the young fellow's blindness, no less than to the material obstacles in the way of their union, it was not at all likely to happen.

"Lawrence of course will write to you, my dear Miss Ruth, and tell you how our plot goes on. It is a good plot."

"He will write to his mother, at all events," said Ruth, with a little sigh. "We shall be interested about it, of course."

"No doubt," said Sir Charles, perhaps with more significance than he intended, for the words brought a quick flush to her face. "And now and then I hope you will deign to think of me."

"I shall always think of you, Sir Charles, with gratitude and respect."

"In that case your kindness will be entirely undeserved," was the unexpected reply. "If I have won respect from one like you, it must have been under false pretences. No, dear Miss Ruth, the most I hope for is that when you hear me spoken ill of, as must needs happen, you will say to yourself: 'There were some grains of good—or, at all events, of tenderness—in the man nevertheless.'"

"I shall say that and more to your detractors, and not only to myself," she answered, with spirit. "I am not always a coward as I was this morning."

"No, you are not a coward. You have a noble nature," he answered, with her hand in his. "I trust you may find someone some day who can not only appreciate it, which even *I* can do, but who may be more worthy of it. To Mrs. Merridew just now, for a reason that you will understand, I said *au revoir*, but to you I say good-bye."

In a moment he was gone like one who fears to stay; but Ruth never forgot his last word or

his last look. There are moments when, for the most jaundiced eye, there is a glimpse of Heaven; and while the man of the world was bidding the girl adieu, all sorts of possibilities of good flashed upon his mind with the speed—and, alas, the brevity—of lightning.

In the hall, where Mrs. Merridew was giving a tearful farewell to her boy, he was himself again. "You are taking from me, though I trust for his good," said the lady, "my only treasure."

"That is the one scruple I feel," answered the baronet, in significant allusion to their little conspiracy. "But he was not happy here, and you would rather be made unhappy by his absence than by seeing him unhappy."

"That is what I am trying to think," she answered, smiling through her tears.

"Upon my life," said Sir Charles to Lawrence, as the carriage rolled away. "I should like to have taken your mother and cousin with us to Hurlby, and left the rest of your belongings to stew in their own juice."

"I beg you will not abuse my belongings, Sir Charles," returned the young fellow, gravely, "if, at least, they include my excellent uncle."

"Oh, Uncle Robert has been giving you the smooth side of his tongue for once, has he?" returned the baronet, with twinkling eyes.

"Yes; it is nothing less than a miracle. He came into my room just now as I was packing up—I thought to murder me; he looked like it—and gave me *this*. It is a cheque from my grandfather for £50 to buy what he called a wardrobe; he meant, I suppose, the clothes to put in it. I could scarcely believe my eyes or my ears."

"Very good—and disinterested—of your uncle," observed Sir Charles drily.

"So he said. He also bade me remember the fact when speaking of him to you. He said he should surely know how I spoke of him, so that it behoved me to be very careful. One has heard of gilding the pill, but to accompany the gift with a menace, is the converse proceeding."

"That is very true, my lad, but you have got his £50. I said they had not spoilt *you*, but, by Jove, you have spoilt the Egyptians, which, as Mr. Pecksniff says, is very soothing."

"On the other hand, when I am gone," sighed Lawrence, "and don't come back again, I fear my 'ingratitude' will be visited upon my poor mother. Oh, how I wish I could make a home for her—and for dear Ruth too—where we could all live together in peace."

"Your ambition is growing, Lorry. First you wanted to make your own living; then 'to make a home' for the young lady at 'The Corner,' and now you desire a quartette."

"Pray don't laugh at me, Sir Charles."

"I am far from laughing, my dear boy; the matter is serious because you are so unreasonable. The very best you can hope for from your pen for a long time to come is to keep the wolf from your own door. As to your mother, that is different; it is possible that with what little she may have of her own, you may at no very distant date be able to keep house together. But to hamper yourself with an engagement——"

"I have not done that," put in the young fellow bitterly.

"I am glad to hear you say so," pursued the other drily; "it would have been madness."

"I should, nevertheless, have been a madman if I could," answered Lawrence gravely.

"Miss Kitty then, I gather, was sane."

"She shrank, not from me, for I know she loves me dearly, but from my poor prospects. I do not blame her. She has had too cruel an experience of poverty herself; but if I ever make my way in the world—oh, sir, if I could win that woman, I would love her as wife was never loved!"

"That resolve is in 'Locksley Hall,' my lad; you remember how the affair came off."

"Yes; but even if Kitty behaved as 'Cousin Amy' did, I should not be bitter against her."

"Quite right; moreover, the bard, when his

judgment was matured, wrote a poem on the same subject, you know, approving of the young person's behaviour to him."

It was hardly a question on which a young man was likely to agree with an old one; but Lawrence was far from feeling annoyed with his patron for thus pursuing it. It was only another proof of the personal interest his companion took in him that he should lay such stress on a matter in which he could have no sort of concern.

It was almost the only topic, however, on which they had hitherto conversed in which they were not in accord, and the discussion, which here closed, left an unwonted silence behind it. Sir Charles was wrapped in his own thoughts and his eternal, or rather eternally renewed cigar. Lawrence had probably even more subjects of reflection, though more easy to guess. Kitty, his mother, Ruth, the home—hateful but for their presence—which, as he devoutly hoped, he had left for ever, and the palace of which he had often heard, in which he was about to find himself so unexpected a guest; London, that "promised land" to which all men—and boys—of letters look forward with such delightful expectation, and the future which literature might have to offer him. Sunk in these dreams he noticed neither the flight of time nor the smooth passage of the wheels

through space till his companion gently said, "There's Hurlby!"

It was still far away, but its vast proportions had begun to dominate the landscape. "A castle, set on a hill," or, rather, on the side of one, backed by great woods, and belted by a river. In size even Hillsland Hall was a cottage compared with it, while in beauty of architecture it was as far superior to it as it was in age. It seemed to Lawrence, as he looked at it, as though he had been only awakened from one dream to fall into another. It was not so much a view as a picture, drawn by some imaginative artist to illustrate a poem. Tower on tower rose like "cloud on cloud," and from the topmost, whence unseen eyes were doubtless watching their approach, there presently shot out a banner like a tongue of flame.

"The castle's welcome to its master," exclaimed the young fellow.

"Let us say rather to its guest," replied the other smiling.

It was perhaps an exaggeration of courtesy, but it became the speaker. Even Sir Charles Walden's detractors—and he had many—were compelled to admit that "he had a very pretty way with him."

CHAPTER XXIX.

AT HURLBY.

There were a good many things in Hurlby Castle which excited, as well they might, the admiration of the county, but what most evoked its astonishment was its wealth of books. A library, of course (like its contents), was something that no gentleman's mansion should be without, but there is a medium in all things, and his neighbours rather resented this excessive profusion of literature. They even attributed to it, to some extent (though it must be allowed there were other reasons), his unneighbourly seclusion. It rendered him independent of their society. They could not understand that it gave him no pleasure.

"I dare say," he said to Lawrence, "that while you are here I can get some people who are not very particular (I mean as regards myself) to come and meet you, but I really think we shall be more comfortable alone. The day before I went to Hillsland I met our squire, who

(when away from his wife) is perfectly affable to me. 'Well, Sir Charles,' he said, with much cheerful energy, 'so you are lowering your fences.' It was not an interesting observation, was it? Of course I knew that I was lowering my fences. If he had told me that *he* was lowering my fences, he would at least (though I should not have cared for it) have conveyed some information to me. You shall meet the squire, if you like."

But Lawrence did not care to meet the squire, and Sir Charles and his guest passed the time alone together. With the latter it went very quickly. The castle was full of everything in which the Hall was deficient: of pictures, and statues, and books. The whole life was new to him, the hushed and stately attendants, and the manner in which they seemed to anticipate his wants; the splendour of the plate, the richness of the banquets, the perfection of the wines; above all the feeling that he was the centre of attention who was wont to be utterly neglected and ignored. It is no wonder that he felt at times like Christopher Sly in the play. That there were chambers in this Bluebeard's castle into which he was not invited, by no means decreased his sense of satisfaction; the semi-seclusion of his host seemed not only natural enough, but was welcome to him. While it left him leisure to do exactly what he liked, it

never trenched upon the duties of hospitality. He saw a great deal of his host, and the more he saw—though he was conscious that he only saw what he was meant to see, that most of his character was a blank to him—the more he liked him.

In his conversation the baronet was always frank; nor did his guest speculate as to whether he might not have been designedly so, in order to encourage frankness; in this respect Lawrence certainly did not require encouragement. He said exactly what he thought, not because it chanced, as it generally did, to coincide with the ideas of the other, but because, notwithstanding his years of slavery, it was natural to him to be free spoken. It was this, no doubt, no less than the fact that what he said was almost always worth hearing, that made his talk attractive to his companion. It is only a few people that dare to be natural, and what seems paradoxical, but is nevertheless true, the most daring conversationalists are often the least natural of all. There is an affectation of originality that is no more like it than prudery is like modesty. But Lawrence Merridew, though by no means modest, was original. His mouth spoke literally out of the abundance of the heart. His simplicity—though it was only skin deep and was certain to be shortlived—was very refreshing to the man of the world who had bidden adieu to it himself

long before his young friend was born. They talked of "fate, freewill, foreknowledge absolute," as though they had been contemporaries. Sir Charles's views upon these subjects were very different from those of Mr. Percy; but carried even less conviction with them to his auditor. They were cynical rather than sceptical, and youth, when natural and wholesome, revolts against cynicism. On the other hand, Sir Charles made no attempt to make a proselyte of the lad, and though satirical, was never contemptuous. Upon the whole Lawrence enjoyed his companion's talk when in the semi-serious vein, more than in any other; no doubt it flattered his self-love to meet the other on such grounds, on equal terms; and imagined, reasonably enough, that the being permitted to do so was a proof of familiarity and friendship.

Years afterwards this visit to Hurlby became, even more than it now seemed, a thing apart in his life; it was still a splendid dream, but not without a certain touch of nightmare. Even while it held him in thrall he felt that there was something unreal about it, and did not desire its long continuance. Considering his age, Lawrence was by no means devoted to pleasure, or careless of the future while pleasure lasted. His experience of life had been too bitter for such forgetfulness. He longed to feel his feet, and fight his way, at all events, out of Hillsland. The idea of

returning thither was abhorrent to him. It would have been even more so if he could have looked over Sir Charles's shoulder and read the note, which a few days after that gentleman reached home, he indited to Mr. Robert Stratton.

"DEAR SIR,—Upon consulting my secretary I find that the balance at my banker's will not permit of my obliging you in the manner you suggested; nor do I feel inclined to change my investments for that purpose."

Whether the secretary was ever consulted in the matter is doubtful, though there *was* a secretary, one Mr. Harbord, a very discreet person of middle age, who lived in much seclusion in his own apartments, and even when he came out of them appeared to be under a vow of silence. He moved without noise, and dressed so "quietly" that the term "my mute," by which his employer spoke of him, might have had a mere professional application. He was closeted for an hour or so with the baronet every morning, and emerged from those interviews with the face of a sphinx. To smile seemed actually painful to him, as though his unelastic lips had no margin for the operation. He was perfectly polite to Lawrence, and showed not a spark of jealousy (as he well might have done) at the intimacy that young man enjoyed with his patron, and which he himself was far from sharing. He

seemed to be always engaged in correspondence. A few years later he might have been likened to one of those automatic machines which, when you put a penny into the slot, return you a manuscript of some kind.

"What do you think of my private secretary?" inquired Sir Charles of Lorry, with one of his queer smiles.

"Well, it is hard to say; he is such a *very* private secretary," replied the young fellow, an answer that delighted his host immensely.

Not even the praise of his epigrams, however (though it was dear to him), nor the being lapped in luxury and the unwonted experience of being made much of for his own sake, could close the young man's eyes to the necessity for exertion. He longed to feel his feet on the step of the ladder that should lead, if not to fame or fortune, at least to independence of some kind. Under no circumstances, perhaps, as has been said, would he have returned to Hillsland, but a letter presently came to him from Ruth that convinced him that return was well-nigh impossible, that he had burnt his boats.

"For some reason or another," she wrote, "Uncle Robert is more set against you than ever." He read this out to his host, who after a burst of laughter grew suddenly serious.

"The fact is, my dear Lorry," he said, "it is *I* who am the reason. You must not speak of it,

because a certain silence should always be observed in such matters. I should have respected your uncle's confidence (though nothing was said between us about confidence) but for this new proof of his swinish nature: he has tried to borrow money of me and failed."

"Borrow money of *you?* Impossible!" exclaimed Lawrence in astonishment.

"Oh, quite impossible," assented the other drily. "But I am afraid I led him to believe that there was just an off chance of my becoming his creditor. Hence these latest execrations against his nephew. I got that £50 for you by it; the sprat he threw out to catch a salmon. It was good interest for the money, however, considering that it was never lent. You may think it was not quite a nice business ——"

"I think it was an excellent business," put in Lorry delightedly.

Sir Charles began pacing up and down the room, a common practice with him when not on good terms with himself.

"Yes, with a wild beast of that kind, delicate scruples are out of the question. The sum was £5,000, I may tell you, no less. When the crash comes with this relative of yours, as it is bound to do, this may be a good card to play with grandpapa. 'Your son, who has told you such lies of *me*,' you might say, 'has concealed

one or two things about himself: that he lost £5,000 on the last Derby, for instance.'"

This was great news to Lawrence, of course, but it in no way altered his determination to get to work; indeed, it quickened it. With his knowledge of Uncle Robert it was easy to guess that his ill-humour would not wait to vent itself upon him on his return, but would be felt by others. His poor mother, from whom he had also a letter, full of love and fears, would feel it. To do him justice, the desire of doing something for himself was even less urgent with him than that of placing her out of reach of contempt and ill-treatment. A home, however humble, with her son would, he well knew, be to her far preferable to her present state of gilded misery.

"I am deeply sensible of your kindness to me," he said to his host, "and of the seeming ingratitude that prevents my being perfectly happy under your hospitable roof, but I feel that I ought to be up and doing. You were good enough to say, 'Why not work here—where I have "a golden pen and heaped up flowers against which to lean"—as well as in London?' but I find I cannot do it."

If he had expected opposition he had been mistaken.

"This is Liberty Hall, my lad," returned the baronet smiling. "When I was your age, and a guest at a country house, none of its attractions

equalled the sense that I could leave it without being pressed to stay. If you are half as much bored with Hurlby as I am ——"

"But, indeed, that is not the cause," put in Lawrence plaintively.

"I know it is not. You have what seems to you a much better reason, though a less one would have sufficed for me, and left no sting behind it. You shall go to-morrow, if you please. Well, that's settled. Now I have something to say to you. It is partly through me that Hillsland has been made intolerable to you. It is I who have burnt your boats for you by declining to be your uncle's banker, so the least I can do in reparation is to become *your* banker. Let me lend you ——"

"Pray, pray, do not go on," said Lawrence with flushed face.

"Well, if it distresses you, I will say no more, but I must say you have less good sense than I had credited you with."

"It is not that, Sir Charles, nor that your generosity fails to reach my very heart," replied the young fellow, deeply moved. "But a loan to anyone in my position might be—very probably would be—a gift. I will take—as indeed I have taken—all other kindnesses from your hand, but not this one."

Sir Charles regarded him with raised eyebrows and an amused smile.

"Curious!" he soliloquised aloud, with an amused smile. "These delicate scruples, my dear Lorry, do honour to your heart, of course, but upon my life they are no compliment to your head. However, I must needs respect them. Let us say no more about it: only if you do want money, don't go for it where your uncle will probably go—to the Jews: come to me."

"I have, thanks to you, £60 in hand," said Lawrence quietly. "Even after paying for my modest outfit, I shall have plenty to live upon till I earn something by my pen."

"You would not have a shilling at the end of a week in London if you were left to your own devices," returned the other confidently. "That catastrophe at least I can, however, guard against. I have written to Latham all about you, and he will not be surprised to see Dick Whittington (as he has facetiously termed you) at any moment. He has two maiden sisters, who will provide you with respectable lodgings in their own vicinity—Nelson Crescent, Bloomsbury—and look after your purse and your morals. It will not be a brilliant beginning of a literary career, but it will be a safe one, as I promised your mother it should be."

This touched the young fellow profoundly; he knew how little such forethought and attention to details were in accordance with the other's character, and he was filled with gratitude

for the solicitude he had thus exhibited on his behalf.

On the morrow, therefore, Lawrence left for London, not unregretted by the household. He had the art (as it is called, though it is a gift of nature) of attracting his fellow-creatures to him. The housemaids wept; the valet who had been put in charge of him pronounced him (as he pocketed his half-sovereign) to be "a good sort" of young gentleman, though he could never understand what had become of his clothes. Even Mr. Harbord stretched his lips into a smile as he said "good-bye" to him.

Sir Charles saw him to the carriage door.

"I shall never forget your kindness," said the lad in a broken voice.

"You will indeed," returned the other gaily but confidently. "Think of me at my best and expect my worst. That is all I ask of you, my dear Lorry."

It was a strange farewell, but not an uncharacteristic one, though the time had not yet arrived for the other to comprehend its full significance.

CHAPTER XXX.

NELSON CRESCENT.

Nelson Crescent, Bloomsbury, is not a fashionable locality; smart people, who live in the little streets off Park Lane, and put their six feet of footman into a cupboard they call a servant's bedroom, turn up their noses at the mention of such an address; but though not fashionable, the houses in Nelson Crescent are roomy. The dinner guest who passes between the fire and the table runs no risk *there* of being burnt to a cinder; air and space are not at a premium; and the garden on which the front windows look is quite an extensive piece of ground, with real trees in it. It is said, of course, that nobody who is anybody would dream of living in Nelson Crescent, but that was not Mr. Leopold Latham's view, who did live there, and thought a good deal of himself. He had a magazine of his own, *The Areopagus*, and also an income, which does not always follow in such cases. Indeed, it was whispered in Paternoster Row that if he had

not had the magazine his income would have been larger.

His two sisters, Margaret and Mary, ladies respectively of fifty and forty years of age, lived with him and helped to diminish it, a misfortune he bore with much equanimity. They were not ornamental, though Miss Margaret thought Miss Mary to be so, "not in her first youth," she admitted; but what is comeliness dependent upon that circumstance? The mere beauty of the Devil (as the French happily term it). There was a majestic grandeur about Miss Mary, who was five feet eleven in her—well, without her shoes—which she pronounced to be queenlike. Miss Margaret herself was even taller, but had not her sister's grace of movement, and was also rather severely marked with the smallpox, which detracts from feminine comeliness. Her brother Leopold had suffered from the same malady; but in a man that matters nothing. He had a good deal of humour—of the sort called "very dry"—and spoke of his countenance as being "beautifully carved." He was less than of medium height, and had that stoop of the shoulders which belongs to the student, and also to those who in their youth have "lived every day of their lives;" and it was whispered that Mr. Latham had earned it both ways. He had distinguished himself at the University not only in the schools, but had combined the rôles of "fast" and

"reading man," and it was at college that he had fallen in with Sir Charles Walden. They had then had many things in common, and though now it would have been difficult to find two college contemporaries more utterly different in pursuits and position, their friendship remained unbroken. Mr. Latham understood the baronet thoroughly; he was the only link with his old life that remained to him; and with all his faults he had a sincere regard for him. Moreover, he was under obligations to him, which though in a material sense had been repaid, his nature was too generous to forget.

He received Lawrence with an old-fashioned hospitality that set him at once at his ease. The young fellow had had no expectations of so kindly a welcome, nor of finding his new friend so handsomely housed. He knew nothing of fashion or its effects on locality, and was surprised at the size of Mr. Latham's residence, and the air of comfort which surrounded him. When at the little Cornish station he had exchanged Sir Charles's barouche for a third-class railway carriage, he had imagined he was bidding good-bye for years, and very likely for ever, to luxury of all kinds. After Hurlby Castle almost every London house would have seemed "cabined, cribbed, confined," but he had taken it for granted that a man like Mr. Latham, living (as he understood) by literature, would have had a

dwelling of far more modest dimensions than he found it to be. The back room on the ground floor, into which he was ushered by the neatest of maid-servants, was by no means a mere study, but well deserved, both from its size and contents, the name of library.

"And how is my friend Walden?" inquired his host, who, with all his geniality of manner, was regarding him, he did not fail to note, with a certain curiosity; "or rather I should say 'our friend,' for he seems to have a strong liking for you."

"He has, at all events, treated me with the greatest kindness," said Lawrence modestly.

"That's well; nor am I at all surprised at it," added the other graciously. "It is rather late for talking over matters just now; indeed, close on dinner-time."

"I am sorry to have intruded upon you at such an hour; but Sir Charles led me to hope that you would be so good as to recommend me a lodging."

"Things must be new and strange enough to you, without the addition, the first evening, of a London landlady. You must dine and sleep here to-night."

"Indeed, Mr. Latham," hesitated the young fellow, "I had not dreamed of inconveniencing you to that extent."

'It is no inconvenience to me, and my

sisters will like it. It will be a great pleasure to them; they do not have a young gentleman from the country to take care of every day. If you don't mind being a little unwell so as to want brown paper and vinegar, or a mustard poultice, it will be a great treat to my sister Margaret. In the meantime I will show you your room. The restrictions as to evening dress are, as the advertisements say, 'suspended' in this house; we can only give you five minutes, after which you will find us in the drawing room."

These details were dwelt upon with some insistence, and Lawrence subsequently discovered they were important in Mr. Latham's eyes. After embracing several religions and pursuing various objects of study and pleasure with much eagerness, he had become content with the observance of punctuality at meals and the disregard of the custom of dressing for them. Similar rules of life await the termination of a good many enthusiasms.

In the drawing-room Miss Latham received her guest with an almost maternal cordiality, introduced him to her sister as to some angelic being of whose acquaintance she was not without hope he might be worthy, and watched the effect with smiling confidence.

Nor did it appear to be misplaced, for, won by so much unexpected kindness, Lawrence's

gratitude shone in every feature, and was set down at once to respectful admiration. He thought Miss Mary very nice and very tall. While he made himself agreeable to the ladies, Mr. Latham looked on amused, with his hands in his pockets. There was a curious likeness in his manner of taking things (though with it all similitude ceased) to that of Sir Charles—a certain philosophical manner that is cousin german to cynicism.

At dinner-time Miss Margaret asked many questions about Hurlby Castle; her brother had been a guest there, but had not sufficiently dwelt upon its magnificence, or its owner's mode of life. In her heart of hearts, though she had never seen him, she felt that the baronet was just the man for Mary; past the heyday of youth, but not the less fitted on that account to appreciate the charms of maturity and a well-balanced mind. Though it seemed he had withdrawn from his position in the giddy world of fashion, was he really resolved never to come to town? Was it true that he had utterly abjured female society? The pleasure Mr. Latham exhibited while his young friend was thus under the harrow was really discreditable; if he did not know much about Sir Charles in his later days, he knew Lawrence knew still less, and his efforts to satisfy Miss Margaret's curiosity tickled him excessively. When, however, she

asked to what accomplishment the owner of Hurlby was most inclined, he took pity on the lad, and replied for him, "Cigar smoking;" at which Miss Margaret bridled up and closed her cross-examination.

When the ladies had withdrawn, Mr. Latham, to Lawrence's great delight, began to talk of business—that is to say, of Lawrence himself.

"I can't do very much for you myself," he said; "my periodical is not a channel of publication very suited to your style of writing; but you may give me the refusal of your contributions, and what is not good enough for *The Areopagus*—I mean, of course, not suitable for it," he added hastily—"I will endeavour to place elsewhere. You must understand, however, that everything will eventually depend upon yourself; literature is one of the few callings in which that is absolutely the case. I don't say that it depends upon merit, because there are many examples to the contrary, but it owes nothing to favouritism after the first start. You will have a good 'send-off,' a strong push from the shore, after which you must trust to the wave and the wind."

"I am fortunate indeed in having so kind a friend to help me," said Lawrence warmly.

"Yes, Walden is a very powerful ally."

"I was thinking just then of *you*, sir."

"Of me? Oh, I merely assist the impulse

that is given by the master-hand. That we shall be good friends I have no doubt, but in this matter I am but the echo of your friend. I have not known him interest himself in any one for years as he has done in your case. It is most important to one situated as you are to have a banker behind one—an ally with the sinews of war."

"But indeed, sir, I am not proposing to be under pecuniary obligations to Sir Charles Walden," said Lawrence earnestly. "He was so good as to offer something of the kind, but I declined it."

Mr. Latham elevated his eyebrows and regarded his young friend with whimsical curiosity. "Really! And yet, as I understand, you contemplate increasing your responsibilities."

"Not, of course, for the present," returned the young fellow deprecatingly. "I look forward in time to be in a position to ask my mother to live with me."

"And there is a cousin also, is there not?"

"I have a Cousin Ruth, to whom she is very much attached," said Lawrence, with a flush, "if——"

"I see," said Mr. Latham smiling, "you are of a sanguine nature, Mr. Merridew; and I am afraid that in cultivating literature you will find it a stiffish soil. However, what can be

done shall be done. Your poems have great merit, but unhappily it is only a very few of our songsters that live by song. They get plenty of sugar, but very little seed. I have looked over what you sent me from Hurlby." Here he rose and produced some MSS. from a drawer. "The poems will all want revision, and some of them are sad stuff; but one or two of the things may be made, I think, between us, marketable. No, no, you must thank Sir Charles, not me. You are much too young to run alone, my lad, and that's the truth, though you are as clever as paint. There is a poem here called 'Silence' that struck my fancy :—

'Gone art thou, Beautiful, but whither gone?
As ye are human men, answer give none,'

it begins; don't you think there is a little redundancy? Are not most men 'human men'? However, that's a trifle.

'Never one drank those eyes but who grew faint,
Never one touched those lips but suffered taint;
Better far deaf were the doomed ears that hung
On thy words, thou charmer, with serpent tongue.'

You were speaking of a man, of course, and not a woman, so I thought.

'Godless thyself, thou mad'st us think of Him
Who, dowered with grace and glory, face and limb,

Fade the heart's lightness in that soul uprise,
And the fine brain make eloquent those eyes;
And mercifully ordained that wheresoe'er
Prayerless thou wanderest, thou invokedst the prayer.
All have forgiven thee, fresh flowerets bloom,
Plucked by some injured hand, over thy tomb.'

and so on; that is distinctly good; and all, I suppose, like the German professor's camel, evoked out of your own imagination, eh?"

Mr. Latham, with a playful smile, waited for the reply.

"Well, yes, I suppose so," said Lawrence, smiling too.

"So I thought. Well, to-morrow we will go over all this together and winnow it a bit."

Upstairs they had a little music. Miss Mary sang some of Moore's Irish ballads with a charming simplicity, while Lawrence turned over the leaves; after which she retired earlier than the rest, like a tired child.

"Beautiful, is she not?" whispered Miss Margaret to Lawrence confidentially, while her brother read the *Quarterly* in his own chair.

"Very much so," he replied, scarcely knowing what she said from the extreme unexpectedness of the inquiry. He felt that he had fallen short of expectation.

"Your cousin, I conclude," she continued,

"though I hear she too is very lovely, is of another style."

"Ruth is darker than your sister," he answered, "but there are many points of resemblance between them." So there were; they both had eyes, nose, mouth, and a chin.

"That is very interesting, and will be a bond between you," observed Miss Margaret; "it will make our house more like home to you."

It did not seem worth while to put Miss Margaret right upon a matter on which she had apparently made up her mind; her exceeding kindness made any sort of contradiction difficult to her guest, and after all, what did it matter? Nevertheless, he was rather taken aback when after a long motherly talk concerning the lodging she had fixed for him and the arrangements for his comfort, Miss Margaret declared that it was an immense relief to her, as regarded his moral well-being, to learn from dear Leopold that he had "a virtuous attachment."

Well, he had—though it was only too likely in the case in question that virtue would be its own reward—and if Miss Margaret had made a mistake in the particular object of it, there was no need to undeceive her. It might be a humiliating confession, but he did not attempt to conceal from himself that what was pressing upon him at present, and was likely to do so for years

to come, was not the providing himself with a wife, but with the means of subsistence. Even the poet who sings of "bread and cheese and kisses" puts the bread and cheese first, presumably because he thought them of the first importance.

CHAPTER XXXI.

LETTERS FROM HOME.

The next morning Miss Margaret introduced her young friend to the apartments she had selected for him. They were clean and neat and reasonable in price, and the landlady, an honest widow, whom she had known for years, at once took a fancy to her new lodger.

Lawrence did not know at the time what obligations he was under in this matter to Miss Margaret. The "long unlovely street" looked melancholy enough; light and air and space, those blessings he had hitherto enjoyed without knowing it, seemed altogether wanting. The spectacle of the poor slavey, with her shoes down at heel, and her expression of hopelessness and exhaustion, depressed him. It was a wet morning, and Bloomsbury in tears is not an exhilarating object. However, when his books were unpacked, his little room would look more habitable, he reflected, and at all events there would be nothing to distract him from his literary labours.

There were thousands of young men in town far worse provided for the struggle for existence than Lawrence Merridew, but most of them had regular work to occupy them, however humble; it was the enforced idleness, when he should have done all that he could do—for our writing powers are limited—in which lay his danger. This is one of the strongest objections—though it is kept out of sight—to a young man's exercising a literary life; he has of necessity too much leisure, which generally means getting into mischief. From this Lawrence was preserved, not so much, I venture to think, by that "virtuous attachment" of which Miss Margaret thought so highly, as by the hospitality of Nelson Crescent.

"When you have nothing better to do, you can drop in here," Mr. Latham had kindly said to him, and this proved a boon indeed. Though the editor was so careful to impress upon him that his benefactions were extended to him only at second-hand, that he was, as it were, but the almoner of Sir Charles, the fact was that Lawrence had made a very favourable impression on him. After all is said of literary jealousies, there is no calling in which men are so ready to help one another as that of letters; though Mr. Latham smiled at Lawrence and his aspirations, he also smiled upon him. Like his friend Sir Charles, he particularly disliked trouble of any kind, yet he took a great deal of pains with the young fellow.

Without it indeed his case would have been hopeless: he was too young a writer to be conscious of his own faults; like all clever lads he was often flippant where he had imagined he was witty, and though he never flattered himself he was sublime, was unaware that in his highest flights he generally only succeeded in making himself ridiculous.

Even when Mr. Latham had done his best for him in pointing out these errors, they would have been sufficiently numerous to have ensured the rejection of his contributions from much humbler periodicals than *The Areopagus* but for its editor's personal recommendation. Though Mr. Latham had made no great mark in the world of letters himself, he was known to have a shrewd eye for literary ability of all kinds, and he recognised in Lawrence Merridew a young man of remarkable talent. The young fellow's observation in particular was very keen, and his very ignorance of life in London presented to him those salient points of which the more experienced eye soon loses sight. He did some sketches of street scenes and people that found considerable favour; but they appeared in comparatively obscure periodicals, and were poorly remunerated. By comparison with what he received from them the *honoraria* from *The Areopagus*, for occasional articles which Mr. Latham had nevertheless almost re-written, were gigantic. With his

simple tastes, and desire for economy, and especially from the absence of temptation to spend money in pleasure, from which the open door in Nelson Crescent relieved him, Lawrence had no difficulty even from the first in making "both ends meet," and even in having a margin. His experience of the cultivation of literature upon a little oatmeal will doubtless, however, be one day narrated by himself—at all events, it is not with that matter that we have here to deal.

On the fourth day of his arrival in town he received two letters from Hillsland with that deep black edging which tells of "the shadow feared of man;" as the superscriptions were in the hands of his mother and Ruth, this, however, moved him but little. A man that has few friends, and knows those he has are safe, is no more affected by such tidings than a bachelor in lodgings is disturbed by the reports of housebreaking in his neighbourhood.

"It is poor Aunt Jerry," Lawrence said to himself, before he broke the seal, and he was right. "It must be a happy release to her." That the occurrence could have any effect upon his own interests never entered his mind; and there he was wrong. We can never say for certain of the conduct of any of our fellow-creatures that it matters nothing to us, a consideration which, if upon no higher ground, should influence our conduct towards them.

The demise of the lady in question, though he himself took it so philosophically, affected his correspondents exceedingly.

"Your poor Aunt Jerry has left us," wrote his mother, "for a better and a happier world. I grieve for her on my own account, though not, dear soul, on hers. I remember the time when we were young children together, and looked forward to quite another lot in this life than that which has befallen us. It is almost as difficult to read our future here as hereafter." "How different all this is," thought Lawrence, "from what I should have expected of my dear mother!" He could not understand the effect of an experience which had never occurred to himself. "Her parting from dear Ruth was most touching. 'I think I must needs meet you again, my darling,' she said, 'if it is only to say how much I owe you.' And this again struck Lawrence as very strange and very unlike Aunt Jerry. "There are only two left here to mourn her, as you know. She is to be buried on Thursday; you will think of us, and of her, on that day, I know, dear Lorry."

He said to himself that he would try to think; but the matter really affected him very little. On the other hand he read again and again the loving words in which his mother replied to the letter he had written her from town; her congratulations upon the friends he had found in

Nelson Crescent; her simple hopes for his success in literature; her prayer for his well-being. "Be a good man, my dear," she wrote, little knowing who had said those pathetic words before her; "it is the only thing to comfort you when you come to lie on your death-bed." Last of all she wrote, "There is another trouble here, which (save with Ruth and me) overshadows the present calamity; Mrs. Robert is ill—really very ill, I fear—and your uncle is greatly disturbed about it." Lawrence's keen eye noticed that expressive term "disturbed," where "distressed" would have seemed so much more appropriate. It was indeed impossible to conceive of Mr. Robert Stratton as distressed. "Dear Ruth's attentions to poor Aunt Jerry were rather grudged, I fear, at last, but of course her duty lay there first. Mrs. Robert has taken a great fancy to have your cousin with her, so that you must not expect a long letter from her, but she tells me she is writing. Ruth never neglects anyone to whom she can give any comfort. She feels her aunt's death very much, I know, but hides her sorrow so as not to add to mine; and that warns me not to make *you* sad, my darling, with the story of our trouble. Only it is well for all of us, even the young and the strong, to be reminded of what sooner or later awaits us all. You have described your position so graphically that I have no difficulty in picturing it; you think yourself alone, but you are not so:

my thoughts and prayers are ever with you, my own boy."

The simplicity of his mother's words touched the lad even more than their tenderness. Here was nature indeed, the core of life, compared with which its externals, with which alone, as his conscience told him, he concerned himself, were insignificant. "What a selfish beast one feels," he murmured penitently.

Then he opened Ruth's letter.

"My dear Lorry,—Your mother will have told you of our loss. It is a sad blow to her, I fear, and has reduced her little world to very narrow limits. The state of Mrs. Robert's health is also giving us no little anxiety." Lawrence ran his eye mechanically down the letter to see if there was really no other allusion to Aunt Jerry's death, but there was none. The writer, he felt, understood him thoroughly. It was not from fear of making him sad that *she* was thus reticent, but from the knowledge that he had so little interest in the subject; he was ashamed of himself that so it was, but it was so. And yet he knew that this tacit reproach was not intended to be such; Ruth loved the dead woman, and was naturally disinclined to write of her to one who had no share in that affection; but her chief motive, he knew, was to tell him what would interest him, and that only. This was evident in every line. "You would be

amused (but for the sadness of the occasion) to see what an important personage I have become —as a sick nurse. Uncle Robert says he will give me a handsome certificate if I ever take up that line of business. It will be difficult for you to imagine this affability; but, indeed, he is much changed. We did him wrong, perhaps, in supposing him not to be genuinely attached to his 'Popsy,' though sometimes I cannot help thinking that he has also some other cause of trouble. He looks haggard and much older than when you left. You must not, however, flatter yourself that he is pining for you. He has never mentioned your name nor, what is more surprising, that of Sir Charles, with whom, no doubt, he concludes you are still residing. Grandpapa shuts himself up closer than ever; Aunt Jane roams everywhere, save into one room. It is curious, though to do her justice she tendered her services, that Mrs. Robert does not at all encourage her visits; this seems to me a bad sign: she must be really ill to manifest so much genuineness of sentiment in opposition to so strong a will; her husband, however, insists on her wishes being carried out in every particular. Aunt Jane is by no means pleased at the preference thus unexpectedly shown me by the invalid, and the consideration it wins for me from Robert; but, as you may imagine, I have not sought this greatness and cannot help its

being thrust upon me. I have not been in the village for many days, so have no news of any kind for you."

Lawrence's eyes lingered over that passage. Was it possible that Ruth suspected he was solicitous about local news? Of course he had not heard from Kitty, nor had he any expectation of doing so, but he would have liked to have had word of her well-being. Mr. Richard Salesby had probably spent or lost all the money he had won at the races by this time, and her short-lived prosperity had come to an end. That circumstance would not make her more tolerant of poverty in the abstract, more inclined to favour his suit. Yet where *could* she look for competence, much more to the wealth to which she aspired? Much as she might despise "water and a crust," they were all that would be likely to be offered her, and it might be that when persuaded of this, she might be driven to accept such bread and milk as he would be able to share with her: the idea of this "starving out the garrison" and inducing it to surrender to him as a prisoner was indeed neither pleasant nor complimentary to himself; but as the image of lovely Kitty presented itself to his mind, he seemed to welcome it with rapture at any price. What a sunshine she would make in "that shady place" (as Nelson Street unquestionably was); what a palace to his eyes would those dingy

lodgings become if beautified by her presence. (What dreams! yet who of us have not had them?)

"Uncle Robert, as I have said," continued Ruth's letter, "has not opened his lips about you, but Aunt Jane has just expressed her apprehensions to me that any prolonged experience of the luxuries of Hurlby Castle is likely to be 'deleterious to a young man who for many years will probably not have two sixpences to rub against one another.' The slight want of gracefulness in the remark must be forgiven her in consideration of the affectionate solicitude which prompted it. No, Lorry, you must not come back here. I am thankful beyond expression for the little gleam of prosperity which, as you tell us, is shining upon you: that the clouds are breaking ever so little is a good sign. I kiss my hand to Fortune who has so far been propitious to you. I bless, with my whole heart, the kind friends you have found in London. All these things seem to promise a better future for you; you know how we miss you, but I am not so selfish as to wish you back at Hillsland Hall. However spare may be your fare, it must needs be better than the grudged bread of dependence. You may say, perhaps, 'but that is *your* bread, my cousin;' well, it is so, but it is not quite so black as yours was; and then you are a man, Lorry, which makes a difference.

I admire you for refusing even Sir Charles's help. No one should accept such aid save, always, from those he loves and of his own kin."

Much of this was characteristic enough of the writer; it was also characteristic, he felt, that from a heart full of sorrow and sadness, she had thus spoken for his sake. He pitied Ruth's position, but was very ready to agree with her that to a woman a state of dependence was less intolerable than to a man. If he had known what she was suffering, and was about to suffer, he would have regarded the matter with less complacency.

CHAPTER XXXII.

RUTH AND KATE.

Young gentlemen like Lawrence Merridew often come up to town as being the only place in which they can see "life." But life is on view elsewhere, and always, just as death is; and it was Ruth Stratton's lot to have a much more remarkable experience of it than her cousin, notwithstanding that he was in search of that very thing, as all young writers are, for "copy." We go to the play to see tragedy and melodrama, but when, as often happens, they come to us, their effect is much greater; happy for us when we are spectators only, and are not included in the *dramatis personæ*.

A few days after Aunt Jerry's burial Ruth took a walk by herself, which could with reason be called a constitutional; for weeks she had played the rôle of nurse, having without an interval transferred her services from the death-bed of one relative to the sick-room of another. Mrs. Merridew had taken her place by the bed-

side of Mrs. Robert; for that lady was still resolute in declining Miss Jane's services, and for the present her will was law; her husband upheld her every wish, and would have been pronounced, by anyone who was unacquainted with his character, a pattern of domestic life; indeed, he had always been a good husband, so far as behaviour went, though everyone but his wife believed his attentions were devoted to his "Popsy's" jointure, rather than to the treasures of her mind or her personal charms. There are many husbands to whom the money settled on their wives is a more lasting source of respect than beauty or even accomplishments; it does not deteriorate with time or use; and often blossoms in their very dust. But it really seemed that in this matter Mr. Robert's detractors (and they were many) had done him wrong.

He was most assiduous in his tendance of his wife, and anticipated her every wish, even though it might not be convenient with his own. Under these circumstances it was not likely that he would spare other people whose services she required, and poor Ruth's energies—already weakened by her long attendance on Aunt Jerry—had been tried to the uttermost. A little air and exercise, and also the opportunity for reflection, she felt, were absolutely necessary to her further usefulness. Within doors, strange to

say, she could not think; the atmosphere of the Hall, heavy with death and sickness, had no doubt something to do with this, but there was also a sense of oppression in it, independent of that, for which she could not account, which seemed to paralyse her mental faculties. Lawrence's absence from home was also a factor in it, and a much more important one than she would have acknowledged. His wit and brightness had illumined its dulness; his gentleness and affection had compensated for their absence in others where she had looked for them in vain, and had long ceased to look; it affected the spirits of the one relative remaining to her whom she loved, and made her a more depressing companion than ever. Lawrence might be "sorry for himself" alone in London, but at least he had work to do which braced and stimulated him; Ruth had no such work, for though she nursed Mrs. Robert with perfect willingness, it could hardly be called a labour of love. This comparison in his favour, however, never entered Ruth's mind; she thought only of his loneliness, and the reflection added another weight to her depression.

It was no wonder, therefore, that she sought that tonic prescription of Dr. Nature's—the fresh air of the hill-top. That breezy moorland had been her favourite roaming place of old. She had raced upon it with Lawrence when they

were children. She had sat with him on the fragrant heather for hours, and listened to his scraps of poems and imaginative talk, in later years, when the lark sang high above them not more joyously. All that was over now and for ever. She had lost him, and her inmost heart told her how much she had lost. He had enclosed a short letter to her in a longer one to his mother; that of itself was a fatal sign. A lover does not enclose his letters; and though full of tenderness and affection, there had, to her sensitive eye, been something wanting in it. Aunt Jerry had been right; in his heart he preferred another. He had doubtless written to Kate Salesby in a very different fashion. "And why should he not?" she inquired of herself indignantly. "He had not played her false; he had never pretended to—to——" She dashed the tears from her cheeks as if they shamed them. If love was denied her, duty was still left. It should be her mission to comfort dear Aunt Merridew; to do what she could for her now and always, though that would be little indeed; to nurse Mrs. Robert and bring her back to life the shortest way.

To those who do right and their best there is, it is said, always content. What copy-book consolation! For what content had poor Mrs. Merridew found in her blameless life, and that tender heart which had been wrung so

mercilessly. The prosperous, so far as her experience went, were the hard and cruel. These thoughts of a soul in conflict followed and fought one another within her, as wave follows and fights with wave. She gave them rein, feeling that somehow the end would be peace, but in the meantime it seemed to her that her fate was hard, that scarcely in all the world could a girl be found in sadder case than she. Instead of deriving strength from the wholesome air, or pleasure from the lovely scene beneath her, the associations of the place filled her with sorrow and regret. The pine wood, with its solemn dirges and hearse-like plumes, seemed more consonant with her feelings than the breezy and sunlit moor, and to the pine wood she made her way. As she neared it a sound fell upon her ears, which, though melancholy and woful enough, was not the solemn sough of the trees, but the wail of human misery. Some little child, perhaps, as had happened before, had strayed too far from her home and been lost—or seemed to be lost—in the dark wood. All thoughts of her own troubles vanished from Ruth's heart at this evidence of another's woe. She pushed on, at first almost in darkness, so strong was the contrast between the sunlight she had left and the shade of the trees, and it was not without some shock to her nerves that from a sandy hollow close at hand there suddenly

bounded up like a stag disturbed in its covert, Kate Salesby. Her sobs had ceased, and she was regarding the intruder with flashing eyes, but the large tears were still standing on her cheeks, and her face had that haggard look which comes only after years of ill-requited toil, or one hour of human misery. Each had taken the other by surprise, but while Ruth was unable for a moment or two to identify her neighbour (who indeed had little likeness to the proud and self-conscious girl she had hitherto known), Kate recognised her at once.

"Who told you I was here?" she inquired passionately. "What right have you, you of all the women in the world, to dog my footsteps? Is it not enough——" Here she paused, recalled to herself less by reflection than by the other's distressful looks, and, with her hand upon her heaving breast, awaited Ruth's reply.

"Indeed, Kate, I had no intention of intruding upon you," she answered sweetly; "though if I had known you were in trouble I should have offered, as I do now, what help I could. I am not so happy myself that I can afford to despise the sympathy of others, or as I would rather say, if you will let me, of a friend."

"*You* not happy? Why should you not be happy?" returned Kate scornfully. "To be sure you have lost a relative"—pointing to her

mourning dress—"but what is death? It cannot be so vile and sordid, or else so shameful, as life itself. If I had not been a coward I should have been dead by now, myself."

She spoke with a vehemence of passion that fell little short of the anguish of despair. "What a hypocrite you are, and how ignorant of what life is, to speak of your unhappiness in the same breath with mine. Look at me and then at yourself."

It was characteristic that the speaker should have made personal appearance the test of such a matter, but indeed there were materials for contrast in it. Although perfectly simple, Ruth's mourning attire was neat to faultlessness; her face, though pale and worn, was calm and composed in its expression, and showed no evidences of violent grief. Kate, on the other hand, might have stood for "Niobe, all tears," save for the resentment which, in spite of them, glared in her eyes; her dress was disordered where she had plucked at it in some access of passion, and covered with sand, though none of this interfered with her beauty, which indeed was heightened rather than otherwise by her intense excitement.

"It is a poor comfort to decide, Kate, as to which of us is the more miserable," said Ruth gently. "But I do assure you, if you think me happy and prosperous, or without the most

serious anxieties both for the present and the future, you are mistaken. I have lost—well, no matter what I have lost, but just now it seems almost everything worth having. Your own case can scarcely be harder than that, and yet I pity you from the bottom of my heart, and if I can comfort you——" she put out her hand to place it on the girl's shoulder caressingly, but the other drew back.

"Don't touch me," she said in quick, hoarse tones, "or you will repent it. I am not fit to touch."

For the moment Ruth thought the speaker referred to her soiled garments, but her face revealed a deeper meaning. It expressed shame, dogged and resentful, but still shame, as well as wretchedness and rage.

"There is no woman who should say that to another," said Ruth gravely. "If you think that such a one as I, at all events, fear to touch you, however ill you may think of yourself, you are mistaken," and with a sudden impulse she stepped forward, and before the other could prevent it, kissed her on the cheek.

"You would not have done that if you had known," cried the other; "but you have a good heart."

"And so, I believe, have you, Kate."

"No; there is nothing good about me; there was at one time, perhaps, but that is over.

All is over. Let us talk of something else. Do you ever write to Lawrence—I need not have asked; I read it in your face; you blush, but yours is not the blush of shame. You do well to love him, for he is worthy of your love."

"Indeed, Kate, you are mistaken," stammered Ruth; "he is my cousin, you know, and we have been brought up together——"

"Just so. It could not therefore have been otherwise. When you write to him, wish him good-bye for me. There is nothing between us, as he knows, for I have told him so; nothing at all; but there is a reason why I cannot say farewell to him; yes, indeed there is a reason. He will never speak of me, and I trust he will never think of me again. I am dead to him, as I shall be dead to you, after to-day."

"Dead, Kate? What *do* you mean?"

"Do not ask. You will know to-morrow. Everybody will know then. I am not going to kill myself as you imagine; I have not the courage; I am a coward as well as everything else that one should be ashamed to be. Yet, I am grateful to you, Ruth Stratton, for your kind words and your sweet looks. I am glad to think —yes, I am trying to be glad to think that they will comfort him and make him happy. I could have done it myself, perhaps, if he had been rich and prosperous; though I am not sure even of that; he took interest in so many things of

which I understand nothing, I was beneath him in so many ways; but to lighten his burdens, to share his poverty, that would have been impossible for me to do. I have seen too much of poverty. I want wealth; carriages, horses, dresses; never to have to think of what they cost. That is what makes one happy. You may say that you did not find me so just now; but there are some things —even poor things—that one regrets to part with, just at first. To-morrow I shall be in Paradise."

"I have not the least idea, Kate, what you are talking about."

"I suppose not," she answered scornfully; "you are such a highly respectable family at the Hall; your stony-hearted old grandfather, and that hypocritical tyrant your uncle—" then with a sudden passionate wail—"Oh, forgive me, forgive me; I don't know what I am saying."

"I am sure you do not, dear Kate," answered Ruth earnestly: "I trust also you are not really thinking of taking any desperate step—I know not what, but one you will repent of—either to-morrow or any day, but if so confide in me, and though my advice may be valueless, it is something, you will find, to have a sympathiser."

"A sympathiser! You!" exclaimed the

other, with a ghastly smile. "No, Ruth. All I ask of you—and I never thought to ask as much—is when hearing of what I am, to remember what I was, and not in pity (I want no one's pity), but in charity to judge me. Farewell."

She was ten yards away before Ruth could put out her hand: she ran at speed through the fringe of wood, and then like a bird along the moor without casting one look behind her. To have pursued her would have been useless, for no girl in Hillsland had so fleet a foot.

What project Kate had in her head Ruth could not guess; but she was convinced that she was on the brink of some desperate act, which would have far-reaching consequences. Nothing, however, Ruth could say or do could hinder it; it struck her, indeed, that she ought to put Mr. Salesby on his guard, but his influence over his daughter was very small, and, moreover, for that day at least interference was out of the question, for the hour was past up to which she could reasonably expect to find that gentleman sober; he was "muzzy" in the morning; he was "elevated" in the afternoon; but at six o'clock—punctually—he was drunk.

Under no circumstances would Ruth have refused her assistance to one in such evidently unhappy case as Kate Salesby, but it might have been impossible to give her sympathy;

with no willing heart could she have helped on any engagement between Kate and her cousin; but it was now clear that no such engagement existed. This was news which could not be otherwise than welcome to her. A wife less suited to Lawrence than Kate could hardly be imagined; indeed she seemed herself to be conscious of her unfitness for that position; it had been a danger of the most serious kind, and one which had threatened his future more than all other opposing causes; and it was now removed. However toilsome might be his path, his steps would not be hampered by a life-long companion who had no sympathy with his efforts, and resented the poverty with which it was only too likely they would be attended. This was indeed a source of satisfaction. It was not of course flattering to Ruth's self-love that Kate had given up Lawrence, as it were, in her favour; in fact, the one thing that she could not forgive her was the imputation, which she was conscious of having combated but feebly, that she was in love with Lawrence herself. But in Kate's state of excitement and despair it was likely enough she should have exaggerated everything, including her own relations with Lawrence; and from this idea it is not too much to say that Ruth derived the greatest satisfaction of all. In spite of the genuine pity she felt for the girl, the information that had been imparted to her

made Ruth a happier woman; and though she would have befriended her in any case, the task seemed much more easy, since in doing so she would not be furthering any matrimonial scheme which had Lawrence Merridew for its object.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHAT RUTH OVERHEARD.

Every student of humanity, who is an honest fellow, confesses (to himself) that he sometimes makes mistakes; it is no wonder, therefore, that those who are not students are still more often mistaken in their superficial diagnosis of their fellow-creatures. Ruth had always taken what would have been called a charitable view of Mrs. Robert Stratton's character; that she was something of a hypochondriac was too obvious to be denied by anybody, given to magnify her ailments, and to arrogate to herself considerable privileges on the strength of them, but Ruth had never assented to the general verdict that she was selfish, affected, and spoilt. But in these days the girl felt no little remorse in having judged "the professional invalid" (as Lawrence used to call her) with even a moderate severity. In real sickness, such as she was without doubt suffering from, she was a model of patience; perhaps it was a bad sign, for it not seldom

happens that persons who exhibit great irritability when "indisposed" become amenable—and even amiable—when seriously ill. The only symptoms of her former character she had retained were those "likes and dislikes" in which she had always indulged herself; and even these were now limited to a very decided objection to Miss Jane. Considering their former familiarity this was curious, unless, indeed, it was a proof of the grave character of her disorder, since when we are very ill our instincts, warning us that we have now no time to spare in being deceived, seldom fail to draw us to the good and turn us from the worthless.

This theory, however, would to some minds have broken down in face of the fact that Mrs. Robert still clung to her husband. She had done so, however, when she had been well—or by comparison well—and no one could question his devotion under the present circumstances. As Ruth had written to Lawrence, Mr. Robert was a changed man, but in nothing so much as in the way that he discharged the duties of a sick nurse. He had always petted his "Popsy," but that had cost him little trouble; he was now her slave. The doctor, who, though living some miles away, was in daily attendance, recommended "constant support," but the poor lady had no appetite and "turned against" the most excellent dainties. The only food she seemed to

relish was what she had been used to as a child in Scotland, from whence she came, oatmeal porridge, and this only when prepared by her husband's hands. We know what Ruth thought of her uncle, yet it now touched her to mark the care with which he ministered to the sick woman's wants, the cheerful wisdom with which he combated the apprehensions she expressed about herself. There was an anxiety not only in his voice, but in his eye (which, as a channel of hypocrisy, is much less under our control), that could hardly be spurious; and whenever he parted from her—which was seldom, and only to take the air for health's sake—the promise that his absence would be cut short was given with the same tenderness with which it was received. Ruth had read of persons who, cold and even cruel to the rest of their fellow-creatures, manifest great affection to their immediate belongings. In her uncle's case this was as limited as the love of a lioness for her cubs, but it certainly seemed to exist. He was really what his "Popsy" called him, "the best of husbands."

Ruth was thrown much more into his society, of course, than she had ever been before, and he puzzled her. It was not possible for her to forget what manner of man he really was, and the presentation of this smooth side of his character —the existence of which she had never suspected —to her observation awoke a certain interest in

her. There were long days passed in the sleep of exhaustion by the patient, in which Ruth had little else to do than to take note of Uncle Robert. They were "Popsy's" only nurses, for such was her wish, and it was law.

"Whom do I need but you, dear Ruth, and dearest Robert?" she would say pitifully. "Could anyone make my porridge for me like him?"

He certainly took a good deal of pains with it, making it soft and palatable with Cornish cream, which the doctor had recommended. If it was not very supporting it was better than nothing, which unhappily was the alternative; but it seemed to do her no good. Some days she was a little better than others, but on the whole she was gradually wasting away. Atrophy the country doctor called it, and very pleased he seemed to be to have found the right name for it. But what weakened her most of all was sickness. Even that native porridge created nausea. But, as has been said, there were intervals.

Curiously enough, when Mr. Robert was summoned away for two days from Hillsland, on business of his father's, and not a pleasant business in connection with a certain mining company, in which the old gentleman had got entangled, his "Popsy" rallied a little, and took her porridge with some approach to appetite; but after his return she grew more rapidly and

distinctly worse. To Ruth it seemed a very mysterious ailment, and more than once she besought her uncle to call in another opinion; but he shook his head, "Popsy is opposed to it," he said; which was final. He could not or would not recognise her danger.

One lovely August evening, when the invalid had had an unusually bad day, Ruth left her asleep in charge of Mrs. Merridew, and stole out in the garden for a little fresh air. It was no longer possible for her to leave her charge for even so long as would have permitted a walk into the village; the sick woman would be sure to inquire for her when she woke up, and to fret if she could not be summoned. Since her walk upon the moorland, Ruth had twice called at "The Corner," but on both occasions Kate had been too unwell to see her. She did not believe she was physically ill, but only indisposed for an interview. It was indeed quite probable that she regretted the impulse that had caused her to be so frank at their last meeting, and was even ashamed perhaps of the emotion she had exhibited. It was, at all events, satisfactory that the catastrophe at which she had hinted as being imminent had not taken place, and whatever rash step Kitty may have contemplated was postponed, or it might be hoped abandoned.

Ruth's anxiety upon Mrs. Robert's account

had by no means caused her to lose sight of the difficulties, or even dangers, in which the girl was placed, but it prevented her mind from dwelling upon them as it would otherwise have done. What with her invalid evidently on the road that led away from amendment, and Kitty in her grievous but unknown trouble, and Aunt Jerry in the churchyard, and Lorry absent and alone in London, Ruth had only too many things —and all of a depressing nature—to think about. And being a sensible girl, and feeling how necessary it was for the patient's sake not to "give way," she had taken a book with her in her evening walk.

It was the first she happened to lay her hand on in her little bookshelf, or if she had given herself time for choice, it would hardly have been "Uncle Silas;" a work of genius indeed, if ever there was one, but certainly not a story fitted to raise the spirits, or to prevent the imagination dwelling upon gloomy themes. Having once opened it, however, at random, the charm of the novel, notwithstanding that she was well acquainted with it, laid hold of her, and filled her with its "fearful joy." It was the chapter where Uncle Silas's unhappy niece discovers that the wicked French governess whom, as a child, she has had such cause to hate and fear, is under the same roof with her.

Philosophy may be studied as we walk, but

the drama—and especially the melodrama—of life, demands a certain amount of repose for its enjoyment; we must take a seat to witness it. Ruth stepped into the same pine-clad arbour in which Sir Charles and Lawrence had found Miss Jane immersed in theology, and the next minute was in another world. It is curious indeed how often the constant but judicious novel reader abolishes time and space in this way, and is transported, as on an enchanted carpet, among scenes and persons he will otherwise never know, but which, while the glamour lasts, are as familiar to him as those of his everyday life, from which he is thus far more separated than in the land of dreams. For in dreams our friends and relatives appear to us, though under grotesque circumstances. In dreams too, it may be noticed, by the way, that the personages of fiction never appear, not even to him who creates them.

Intent on her novel, Ruth suddenly hears Uncle Silas talking with his more dissipated but less cold-blooded son, and what he says is quite unlooked for.

"I tell you that the guarantee is all right, and how I have obtained it is no business of yours."

"But when the six months come to an end, Stratton, how will you settle with the Jew?"

Then she knows that it is not Uncle Silas and his son she is listening to, but Uncle Robert and his friend and boon companion, the Reverend Arthur Grueby. The horror of the fact is somehow worse than the horror of the fiction. Ruth is paralysed with terror, not so much at her situation, which is that of an involuntary eavesdropper, nor even at what she overhears, but at the tone of the speakers. It is confidential, of course, but there is also a certain reticence in it, as though both men had much more on their minds than they contrived to express. How she comes to hear them is simple enough, though not to her. Her mind is far too disturbed and affrighted to suggest to her that they are merely standing under the shelter of the arbour out of the wind, because one has let his cigar go out, and is relighting it with a wax vesta. Finding themselves so comfortable they stop for a minute, as smokers often do, before resuming their walk. What Ruth is saying to herself is that they will come to sit down in the arbour, and find her there spying upon them. Why she should have spying imputed to her, she does not know, but that it will be so, she is well convinced; indeed, since they continue their conversation, and she continues to listen to it—for she is speech-bound—they will have a reasonable cause of complaint.

"Five thousand pounds, with the interest,

is a big sum?" continues the vicar interrogatively.

"Unfortunately it will be only too easy to pay it, or five times as much long before the time you mention."

"Good heavens! Is your poor lady so ill as that?"

"I fear so; that at least is the doctor's opinion. I have been hoping against hope; but I can do so no longer."

"Tut, tut; what a sad business! Still it is the common fate."

There was an uncomfortable silence, then, "I don't think these cigars are so good as the last you got me, Grueby."

"They are the same brand," and with that the speakers moved away.

Freed from one terror, Ruth was now overwhelmed by another; she felt sick and shocked. Only that very day had the doctor informed her that though Mrs. Robert was ill, there was no reason to apprehend a fatal issue; if the constant sickness should be cured, or even intermitted, strength would return to her; only that very day Uncle Robert had expressed to her the most sanguine views of their patient; so far from "hoping against hope," he had never hinted at any serious danger from first to last. Yet all along, or certainly for some time, it now appeared that he had foreseen that she would die; and he

could speak of that catastrophe in the same breath with a criticism on a cigar. Moreover, and worse than all, his wife's death it seemed would release him from some grave pecuniary trouble.

These things, not in logical sequence, or one after another, but in one appalling aggregate, presented themselves in a moment to Ruth Stratton's mind. The little edifice of good opinion which had been in course of erection within her during these latter days respecting her uncle fell to pieces like a house of cards. He was proved at once to be heartless and hypocritical. He might well, indeed, be so devoted to his "Popsy," since he knew that the inconvenience of so being would last for so short a time, and that he would be so well rewarded for his trouble; that he should have *that* contingency in his thoughts filled Ruth with a shadowy but possible fear which she felt it her duty to expel; we must be just and charitable even with the lowest of our fellow-creatures; the ties of blood, the law of nature herself, protested against the dark suspicion that had found entrance into her soul. And yet there it was; the dew on her brow, the trembling in her limbs, the sickness at her heart, announced it to be there. When she strove to analyse the reasons for its shameful presence, she came to the conclusion that it was mainly caused by the condition of mind in which it found her. She

had been deep in "Uncle Silas," and his crime had transposed itself to her living uncle; such things only occurred in fiction; indeed, Uncle Silas himself had shrunk from lifting his own hand against his helpless guest and kinswoman; whereas in this case—though the temptation, alas, was the same, and the hypocrisy, and the coldness of heart; "these cigars are not so good as those you got me last?"—the victim was the man's own wife, the woman he had sworn to cherish in sickness and in health—no, she would cast out the shocking thought, and pray to Heaven that her beating heart might never again entertain such a visitant. What were poverty and isolation and dependence compared with the misery of such a suspicion as this? So groundless, too; the monstrous offspring of a prejudice. She would have had reason indeed to be ashamed of herself, to ask pardon of high Heaven for having imputed such a crime in the case of any fellow-creature; but of so near a kinsman, it was worse—detestable. Thus she reasoned with herself, with contemptuous indignation at her own imaginings, and not in vain. Charity and common-sense presently overcame them. It was time that she should return to her patient, and in the performance of her duties to forget these morbid fancies. On the threshold of the sick chamber she met Uncle Robert, with a cup in

his hand; he looked anxious and troubled. "It is so unfortunate," he said, "that dearest Popsy has taken a distaste for porridge: she used to be so fond of it, and Shepstone (the doctor) so strongly recommends it? I do hope, Ruth, you will try to reason with her; see, she has not drunk half of it."

"I will do my best to persuade her to take it," said Ruth, and she held out her hand for the cup.

Uncle Robert hesitated. "It does not signify for to-night," he said; "I was speaking of the matter generally."

"Still, if it is good for her, why should she miss a meal?" said Ruth, taking the cup from his hand. There is nothing wrong with the porridge, I suppose?"

"Wrong?" he replied angrily. "Well, of course not. I have made it myself with cream and sugar as usual."

"She must have it while it's hot," returned Ruth quietly, and entered the room, closing the door behind her.

Another minute in her uncle's company was more than she could just then have borne. She had indeed been perfectly calm in her manner. It was his hand, and not hers, that had trembled as she took the cup from him; but the strain upon her nerves had been almost beyond endurance.

There was an ante-room, separated from the sick-room by a portière, and here she remained for a few seconds to recover herself. When she made her appearance by the bedside of the invalid she no longer held the cup in her hand.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BY THE SICK BED.

As Ruth approached the bed, Mrs. Merridew withdrew to make room for her, and pointing to the patient, who was apparently asleep, said softly—

"She is not so well to-night, I am sorry to say."

"I am dying," murmured Mrs. Robert faintly.

"Nay, I trust not that," answered Ruth, bending over her.

"Why should you wish me to live?" was the querulous reply. "I turn against everything, even against life itself."

It was characteristic enough that disinclination for her food should loom so largely in the sick woman's mind, and an hour ago Ruth would have thought little of it, but it had now a far greater significance for her.

"You could not take the porridge, my dear," she said, as though she was addressing a child,

for that was the manner that suited "Popsy" best. "Perhaps it was badly made."

"Oh, no; dear Robert made it himself, and, of course, beautifully; but even that now makes me ill. I have been *so* sick."

Ruth herself felt sick, though from quite another cause. She would have given much to have been free to go to her own room and have a "good cry" before sitting down to think what was to be done; but for the present it behoved her, above all things, to be mistress of herself. She had a presentiment that ere she reached that sanctuary she would need all her strength for yet another ordeal, nor was she mistaken. While "Popsy" was still detailing her symptoms, which apparently had been of the same kind as usual, though somewhat more serious, Uncle Robert entered the room.

"Come, come, that's well," he said gently. "I see you have been persuaded by Ruth to take your porridge, though you would not listen to me."

"She has not taken it," interposed Ruth quietly. "She thinks that it was that which made her ill."

"But it's gone," exclaimed Uncle Robert, in a tone in which, to her ear, astonishment seemed not unmixed with alarm; "the cup is in the ante-room, empty. Where *is* the porridge?"

"I threw it away," said Ruth indifferently.

"It was hopeless to induce her to take it Dr. Shepstone must recommend her something else."

"The doctor knows better than you do," he answered harshly. "We must consider the health of our dear patient, and not her fancies."

He took no pains to lower his voice, though he was standing close to the bed. It was the first time he had shown himself in opposition to his wife, and she resented it by silence. Her head was turned away from him, and she had closed her eyes.

"I had been in hopes to find you better, my darling," he returned softly. "I had just been telling Grueby before I came in to give you your porridge that I thought you had turned the corner. I had felt so much more cheerful about you, that I joined him in having a swim in the lake, the first I have had since you were ill. It is late, and the water was cold."

"How this man lies!" was Ruth's reflection. Why did he talk like this? Was he speaking at random because his mind was occupied by quite another matter that might well monopolise it. At all events, he spoke in vain. His "Popsy" answered nothing. "I think our dear one is asleep," he murmured; "that is more likely to do her good than anything. Be sure you call me," he added, turning to the two ladies, "when she wakes."

He turned away, but, as Ruth thought, he delayed in the ante-room. She could hardly breathe for terror; it paralysed her even worse than it had done in the summer-house; her blood seemed to leave her heart and rush to her head. If he had returned, she felt that she must shriek out "Murderer!" But in a moment or two, which seemed hours, the outer door closed.

He was gone.

"Be so good as to stay for five minutes longer, Aunt Fanny," said Ruth; "I have forgotten to take off my outdoor shoes."

Fortunately she had forgotten to do so; for to invent an excuse for leaving the patient would have been impossible. Her mind was too full of terrible thoughts, too occupied with the immediate purpose she had in view, for any effort of imagination. In the ante-room upon the table stood the empty cup; was it fancy that caused her to conclude from its appearance that it had been wiped round as with a handkerchief, so that no vestige of the porridge remained in it. At all events, it now struck her for the first time that what remained of the patient's meal had always been thus cleared away; unless her uncle took the cup away with him. On a chair lay Ruth's hand-bag, in which she was accustomed to keep such work as she could employ herself upon, while watching by the sick bed. There

was something in the bag now beside the work.

When she reached her room and had locked the door, she took it out. It was an empty marmalade pot that had been in the room, into which she had poured the remains of the porridge from the cup, and this she proceeded to carefully tie down with paper, as a housekeeper ties her jam. When this was done, she placed it in a drawer and locked it, and then threw herself into a chair with a deep sigh. If she had expected tears to come to her relief she was mistaken, nor, indeed, did she seem to need them.

There was no time for lamentation now; she must think, and when she had taken thought must act upon it. If she was doing her uncle a wrong in suspecting him of this most heinous crime, it was a grievous wrong; but that had been already committed. She did suspect him. And what were scruples on that account compared with the necessity of preventing the accomplishment of his crime, if her suspicion was well founded. What had unconsciously hardened her heart against him and given her the courage to do what she had done, was his request that she should persuade his wife to take the porridge. He had not hesitated—supposing he was the wretch she believed him to be—to make her his instrument and confederate, and had placed in her own hands the cup, the

contents of which were intended to shorten his wife's days. There was not an hour to be lost in putting a stop to this most treacherous and unnatural design, but if there had been time to spare she would not have spared *him*. His punishment (should he be found to deserve it) would have been equally swift. But how should the proof be brought about? The doctor would, of course, have been the proper person in whom to confide her suspicions; but she had little confidence in the doctor. He would probably pronounce her suspicions incredible. He had a great respect for the county families, among whom he reckoned the tenants of the Hall, because he attended them, and Uncle Robert had gone out of his way to conciliate him. In his incredulity and weakness he might even reveal her accusation to her uncle himself. And to whom could she make it except to the doctor? Certainly not to Mr. Grueby, who, though he might be shocked and horrified at it, would, even if he believed it, decline to prosecute his friend. His advice would be to hush it up, which would probably only cause her uncle to put off the execution of his design to a more convenient season. For an instant Ruth even thought of Sir Charles, but apart from the extreme disagreeableness of consulting him on such a matter, he was the last man to trouble himself with investigations.

Mrs. Robert had relations alive, a brother and a married sister. They ought, of course, to have been written to long ago, but her uncle had forbidden it, it would make dear "Popsy" nervous about herself. How could Ruth write to them, when he had declined to do so? And what help could they be, at present, even if she did. Then there flashed upon her mind, as though she had seen it written by some spirit hand upon the sky, "There is Mr. Percy." She knew him well, though of late she had seen little of him; he now seldom came to the Hall; but at one time, when Lawrence was his pupil, he had been a more frequent visitor, and had impressed her very favourably. Her cousin had always spoken of him in the highest terms. He was a man she could trust, and whose advice would be valuable. But he lived ten miles away, and what excuse could she frame for visiting him? Moreover, she was very unwilling to leave her patient alone and unprotected for so many hours. The post had gone, and upon the whole she decided to telegraph to Mr. Percy the next morning. It would be impossible to state the reason of her summons, or make any allusion to her uncle, for the postmaster, like most other folk in Hillsland, was under the squire's thumb. It was a case in which some duplicity was permissible. "Pray come at once," was the form which, after some consideration, her message

took. "I wish to consult you in connection with Lawrence. Urgent."

The matter had certainly some connection with Lawrence, as with herself; if her uncle should get to know of the telegram, she would have to tell him of her cousin's having gone to town; but under present circumstances she rightly judged that no communication regarding his nephew would have much effect upon the squire. He had other things to think about. So, indeed, had she. For the time, Lawrence and his affairs were banished from her thoughts. It was better—notwithstanding the need in which she stood of sympathy—that he was not at home. His indignation against his uncle, whose guilt he would have taken for granted, would have been overwhelming, and impossible to restrain. It was difficult, indeed, for herself to conceal the horror with which she regarded him. And it was so necessary to conceal it. In the case of one so subtle, to be forewarned was to be forearmed; and with so deadly a design in his mind the least thing was likely to arouse his suspicions. She fancied, in fact, that he already had them; that he glanced at her askance; and watched her as she waited on the invalid, with unusual attention. How she kept her wits about her was a wonder to herself, but she did so. She even promised him to do her best the next day to reason "his precious

Popsy" out of her prejudice against the nourishment that had been specially recommended for her. "If she continues to be so fixed against it," he said, "I must devise some other form of food." He was going to make the doctor his cat's-paw, as before, Ruth felt, with a shudder.

Before the invalid had settled down for the night, the ex-Commissioner paid her a visit. Notwithstanding she had been ill so long, it was his first; but there was nothing surprising in that. He kept himself almost as secluded from his own family as from the outside world. What struck Ruth was her grandfather's manner, which was for a wonder interested, and at the same time *distrait*. His tone, when he addressed his daughter-in-law, was unusually kind, for he had never liked her, and she knew it. He thought her full of fads and fancies, which he objected to because it prevented the undivided attention which was his due being paid to himself. He had probably not hitherto believed that her illness was a serious one; but it was plain that he did so now. Indeed, his very tenderness alarmed the poor woman, who afterwards inquired of Ruth whether her grandfather thought she was about to die, he was so civil.

Ruth met the inquiry with a smile, though it made her sick at heart, for she felt that the invalid had rightly interpreted his manner.

Robert must have told him what he had told Mr. Grueby. It was only to be expected—if her suspicions of him were correct, and they grew stronger every hour—that he should thus prepare those about him for that termination of her illness which he had only too good grounds for foreseeing. But there was something else unusual in her grandfather's manner, though not so significant. When not actually conversing with his daughter-in-law, he appeared as self-involved as herself and oblivious to what was going on. Was it possible that he was calculating the future? Forecasting the benefits that would be derived from her decease? That such an idea should enter into Ruth's mind was a proof how saturated it was with the thought of her uncle's delinquencies; for her grandfather was one of the most egotistic of men. If Mrs. Robert's fortune had been coming to him, he would doubtless have been interested enough in the matter; but his son's affairs were by no means his. He was independent of him. The idea of getting him off his hands, which would no doubt have occurred to him in the case of any other member of his family, could not exist as regarded Robert.

What then made him so preoccupied? Surely the son could never have confided to the father the wickedness he had in contemplation? Yet even this suggestion obtruded itself on the

unhappy Ruth. The burthen of responsibility that had been laid upon her shoulders was, in fact, too great for them to bear. Another twenty-four hours with this continued strain upon her mind, and with no one in whom to confide, would, she felt, overthrow its balance. Like a sick man, she longed for the morning, for if Mr. Percy was at home she felt he would not fail her.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MORE TROUBLE.

Before breakfast next morning Ruth took her telegram to the village post-office. It was a lovely day, but the glories of the summer morning had no charms for her. On the contrary, the contrast of the bright and beautiful landscape and pure sweet air, with the thoughts within her—which dwelt perforce on cruelty and crime and wrong—depressed her. That the earth should look so fair while such deeds were in contemplation, seemed to prove how little nature was in sympathy with man. As she passed "The Corner" she was astonished to see Mr. Richard Salesby in his garden at so early an hour. He was one of those gentlemen who like to have the world well warmed for them—as though it were their bath—before they step into it; if they ever "meet the sun upon the upland lawn," it is because they have sat up all night. And indeed, to look at him, you would have said that this was exactly what Mr. Salesby had done. His

appearance was unkempt, his beard unshorn, his scanty crop of iron-grey hair uncombed; the expression of his face was so wild and angry, as he stood at his garden gate, with his short black pipe in his mouth, that Ruth would have avoided him altogether if she could, but the footpath skirted his domain, and to have crossed the narrow road to the other side would have been self-evident in its purpose.

"Good morning, Mr. Salesby," she murmured as she drew near him.

"I see nothing good in the morning," was the unconciliatory reply, "nor for that matter in the afternoon neither; there's nothing good in the world, everything's bad, but especially women."

"That is not polite to myself, nor fair to your daughter," said Ruth, forcing a smile.

"As for yourself, then, I apologise," he answered, looking at her, not very steadily, because his whole body was swaying from side to side, but with a scrutinising glance that had no disfavour in it; "drunk or sober, I know a lady when I see her. And you could not speak like that about my girl, if you wasn't straight. I don't think you know anything about her. Not that *I* want to know either. I've done with her."

"Done with her? Done with your daughter, Kitty? What *do* you mean?"

"Just what I say; neither more nor less; she's made her own bed and may lie on it. It's

not your fault; no, nor *his* fault, though, mind you, if I catch him at Hillsland, I'll wring his neck for him—she's a downright bad 'un. A girl as 'ud deceive her own father, and such a father as I've been to her, too, as never denied her anything, and let her take her own way just as she pleased. Well, she'll deceive *him*, that's one comfort."

"Deceive whom?" was on Ruth's lips, but the words never passed them. A terrible fear took possession of her: quite as great, though of a different kind from that which had fallen upon her in the summer-house yesterday. If Kitty had deceived her father, perhaps she had deceived *her*, and in the same matter. Even in that moment of horror and despair she thought no ill of Lawrence. As this poor drunken creature had himself admitted, Lorry (if, indeed, it was her cousin of whom he spoke) was not to blame. But if Kitty had fled to *him?* One little hand mechanically sought the gate, and clung to it, just as Mr. Salesby was clinging to it, and for the same reason, to prevent herself from falling.

"Ah, you know *now*," he said, with hideous sagacity. "She used to say as you were sweet upon him yourself. I was thinking about that this morning, but concluded it was only one of her lies to put me off the scent; but it seems she was telling the truth for once. Well, you had an escape; for though, as I just said, I don't blame him, as I blame her; he's a scoundrel and a liar

too. She would never have gone to him without an invitation; and as sure as the sun is in heaven, if I ever again catch sight of him I'll wring his neck. A pretty thing, indeed; the oldest family in the county to end this way; 'came in with the Conqueror,' as the saying is, and gone out like a farthing candle. If he'd married her it would have been bad enough, but, of course, he won't marry her. My Kitty a light-o'-love, a trollop——" and the wretched father burst into tears.

"You are wrong, and are doing Kitty wrong," cried Ruth, for though what she meant was "you are doing Lawrence wrong," the spectacle of the unhappy man in his grief was infinitely more touching than it had been in his tipsy wrath, and made her very heart ache. "It is not possible that she could so disgrace herself."

"Possible!" he echoed contemptuously; "she has confessed as much. I've got it under her own hand. That is I *had*, but I've torn up the letter. I want to see nothing more of her, or hers; never again, never again!"

"You have *not* torn up her letter, Mr. Salesby," said Ruth gently; "let me see it."

It was a bold stroke, the result of instinct rather than of reason, but it succeeded.

"I don't know whether I have or haven't," said the man doggedly; and as he spoke he drew it out of his pocket with his disengaged hand, which had been clasping it there all the time.

"Yes, here it is. She wrote it last night, and left it on the table for me to see—a pretty sight for a father—and then went off by the morning mail. She must have walked ten miles with her little bag to meet it. She took nothing with her but her little bag. My poor Kitty! But there, I've done with her."

It was shocking to see his maudlin misery, to hear his vehement resolve to wash his hands of his daughter, but worse of all to listen to one of those touches of true pathos that bespoke him human still "under the mud." What gave Ruth some little comfort was the evident satisfaction of the wretched man in having found someone in whom he could confide, and even look for sympathy. She was no longer afraid of him, indeed he seemed to be afraid of *her*, as, having placed the letter in her hand, he waited with anxious look for the deduction she should draw from its contents, which were brief and curt enough.

"Father, I am going away to London, where it would be useless for you to look for me. I have found someone to care for me, which has not been, I must say, the case at home. In saying good-bye, however, I do not wish to blame you; the less inquiry you make about me, the better it will be for both of us. You need not fret about my future, which is provided for. —KITTY."

"Well, well, what do you think of it?"

inquired Mr. Salesby impatiently. "Better than I do, to judge by your face."

This was not at all the case, so far as the writer of that epistle was concerned. There was in fact but one inference to be drawn from it, which shocked and distressed Ruth exceedingly; but unless it was composed with great duplicity and the intention of throwing the reader off the scent, it seemed plain to her that the person, whoever he was, who had been found to "care for" the unhappy girl could not be Lawrence Merridew. That was not the language she would have used in his case, nor was it possible that "her future could have been provided for" by such a course of conduct. It was not to be expected, however, that the satisfaction Ruth derived from this conviction should be shared by Mr. Salesby, and indeed she felt no little remorse for having entertained it in the presence of such shame and sorrow. It was impossible to tell Kitty's father what she thought of the girl's intentions, so she took refuge in interrogation.

"Was your daughter acquainted with anyone in town to whom her expression 'caring for her' could possibly apply, so far as you know, Mr. Salesby?"

"Only one person, and you know him as well as I do, and better," he answered doggedly.

"If you mean my cousin, you are certainly mistaken," she answered quickly. "I say nothing of his being a man of honour and incapable of a

baseness; but he has hardly enough money to support himself, much less to insure the future of another person."

"Then you think no one has promised her marriage?"

Ruth was silent; she could not give the answer that was needed, and Mr. Salesby's face, like the Gorgon's, seemed to turn her into stone. She understood now that which he had hoped for, while pretending to denounce it, was that Kitty had found shelter with her cousin, who might at least "have made an honest woman of her," and that this hope had fled.

"Give me back her note," he said hoarsely. He took it and tore it along and across, and threw the pieces to the wind. "That is the last of her," he said. "I have done with her. Never speak to me about her again, Miss Ruth."

With that he staggered along the garden path, and passed into his house, slamming the door behind him. Ruth's heart bled for the poor drunken wretch. Under any other circumstances she would have thought of nothing else save Kitty and her father. It was a tragedy sufficient to monopolise any mind. But unhappily there was another, darker still, and that had not yet reached its *dénouement*, which pressed upon her attention. For the moment, in this terrible domestic revelation, she had almost lost sight of it; but now the errand on which she had come

out that morning recurred to her. On the one hand was ruin, which no action of hers could mitigate or deter; on the other was death, which it was possible for her to avert; in the one the blow had fallen, in the other the victim was only menaced. It behoved her to be up and doing, and to leave lamentation for a fitter time.

The post-office at Hillsland was a very small affair; it was a little shop where candles and string were sold in tiny quantities, and where nothing was kept in stock but lollipops. Bottles of them of different hues stood in the window, looking like a parody of a chemist's shop; it was not so long ago since Ruth herself had bought "bull's-eyes" and "peppermints" there; the old post-mistress had known her from a child, and could hardly picture her to herself as having grown up.

"Lawk-a-daisy! Miss Ruth, you *are* early this morning. And how's Mrs. Robert? I have heard as how she's very sadly."

"She is certainly very unwell. I want to send this telegram, please."

"Yes, sure. Elizabeth!" The old woman raised her voice to summon her niece, who was the telegraphist, from upstairs. "Well, I *am* glad as you are sending for another doctor. They think it so strange in Hillsland."

"But I am not sending for another doctor; I am telegraphing for Mr. Percy."

"Mercy me, the parson! She's so bad as that, be she?"

"Ruth answered nothing, but gave the girl her telegram, who read it out aloud: "I wish to consult you in connection with Lawrence. Urgent."

"Deary me, then," said the older woman, "the news must be true about Miss Kitty."

"What news?" inquired Ruth, with such unwonted sharpness and anger that it even struck the old gossip that she had put two and two —or rather, one and one—together a little hastily.

"Well, Miss Ruth, it was only my idea," she murmured apologetically, "but Jim Bell, the maltster, he did say as how he saw Miss Kitty step into the mail train this morning: and who could she be after, says I to myself, *except* Master Lawrence? She's been very queer ever since he went away, the servant girl up at 'The Corner' told our Martha, and we all know how thick they was together before, but I dare say *you* knows better."

"I know nothing of where Miss Kitty is gone, nor does my cousin either. This has nothing to do with her at all," said Ruth, hardly knowing what she said. All those suspicions had flocked round her again which Kitty's letter had put to flight.

Kitty's fondness for Lawrence (for poor Ruth

preferred to put it *that* way, even to herself) was, it seemed, the talk of the village. Never surely had any girl such causes for wretchedness as herself. And yet it was absolutely necessary for her not to dwell upon them; to put herself out of sight and keep her head cool and her judgment clear for the sake of others.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

Breakfast at the Hall that morning was for Ruth a cruel ordeal. Appetite, of course, she had none, and while she affected to eat she had to listen to the conventional talk about the invalid, which, for her, had acquired such a terrible interest.

Mrs. Merridew thought ill of "dear Rosa's" condition, while Miss Jane took an opposite, though it could hardly be called a more cheerful view; ascribed her aversion to food as partly affectation, and did hope that when the doctor came he would induce her to listen to reason, which it seemed Robert was unable to do.

Ruth did not dare visit the sick room for fear she should be detained, and Mr. Percy, or a telegram from him, arrive in her absence. She got Mrs. Merridew to take her place on plea of a severe headache, which indeed was no pretence on her part, and kept in her own little sitting-room; its window commanded the road leading

from the village, and at it she sat with her fevered brow pressed against the pane. We have most of us had to watch and wait in our time for events which Fate holds in her hand and distributes independently of our control; when poor Humanity sits like a beggar at the gate of the Future, and looks for scraps of comfort, too often in vain; but in Ruth's case there was not only anxiety but a weight of responsibility such as her young shoulders were hardly fitted to bear; the very issues of life and death might depend on her.

Though Mr. Percy could not arrive within two hours at earliest, a telegram might, but this, if he was not at home, she did not expect. He would understand her position; that her message was of her own sending, and not intended for publication of any kind, which a reply from him was likely to involve; for though, as she had put it to herself, Robert had other things to think of just now, the good clergyman would know nothing of that, and was aware that Lawrence's name was hateful to his uncle. If he was only at home she knew she could trust to his tact as to his sympathy; but he might be away, and in his absence—on a pleasure tour, or a visit, or even a shopping expedition to the county town—on such small matters do our deepest interests depend—there might be murder done.

At last, on the summit of the hill, she beheld the sight she sought; the rector on his big black cob—his only personal extravagance, for it had been a costly animal—and riding at a rate that was very unusual with him. Tears of gratitude both to God and man sprang to Ruth's eyes. Half her anxieties, because she knew they would be shared, seemed to vanish at once.

How sweet is the sight of a friend in need! And this was no fair-weather friend. A man whose hand could be trusted to steady one over ever so deep a stream, and the clasp of which even in that last hour when the waters of death are rising had given assurance to many a sinking soul. As he galloped by, Ruth threw up the window and pointed to the stables; he drew rein at once, and having disposed of his horse came on foot to the front door, where, as he knew, she would be waiting for him. She took both his hands, with a "Thank heaven!" instead of "Good-day," and led him to her boudoir.

"You have a charming view," he said, as he looked out upon it, to give her time—also because he saw she would have broken down had he looked at her, or touched at once the matter concerning which he had been summoned. "It commands the lake even better than Lawrence's old room did. Now what is it about our Lorry?"

"It is not about Lorry at all, dear Mr. Percy; I wish it were; a subterfuge which you will forgive" (for his brow had clouded), "and even commend when you know all. It is about Mrs. Robert."

"Your uncle's wife?"

"Yes, his wife," she answered, with a shiver. "The woman he has sworn to love and to cherish. He is murdering her by slow poison."

"Great Heaven! you must be dreaming, my dear Ruth. You have been sadly tried of late, I know; anxiety and sorrow——"

"Oh, pray at least believe that I have not lost my wits," exclaimed the girl beseechingly. This was the one difficulty that had not occurred to her in all her forecasts, and yet she was compelled to acknowledge that the suspicion was a natural one. "I am not mad, though I have suffered enough to make me so."

"I know, I know," he answered soothingly; "first one trouble and then another. Lawrence's going, and then your aunt's death, and now this illness in the house."

"It is about that that I want to speak," she murmured hoarsely. "I may be wrong; Heaven grant I may be found so; only listen to me; then judge for yourself."

He nodded and smiled, and drew a chair beside her own.

"Come, let us hear your story," he said

encouragingly, as though she were a timid child.

Then she told it him, every detail of it, in a hushed voice, but quite distinctly and coherently. His face was full of interest throughout, but at first it was only tender and sorrowful. His interest was in the speaker alone, but as she went on it was transferred to the subject. His face became anxious and troubled, then grave and stern. His brow grew dark, his lips moved inarticulately, unintentionally urged by the thoughts within him. He never interrupted her by a word.

When she had done he rose and paced the room.

"It is a terrible indictment," he murmured; "but his foreknowledge of the end and his concealment of it; the benefit he derives from her death; his necessity for a large sum of money; his making the porridge with his own hands, and his extreme solicitude that she should take it, though it has such ill-effects upon her; these, indeed, awaken suspicion. But, after all, we have no proof."

Ruth unlocked a drawer and took out the marmalade jar, covered and sealed up.

"There is the proof," she said. "It must be analysed."

"That is an excellent suggestion. You are a wise girl," he said.

"I would rather you still thought me mad," she sighed. "Not that I am really wise; but I have thought of little else for the last twenty-four hours. You are something of a chemist, I know."

He shook his head. "This must not be touched save by some disinterested person. Maitland, the public analyst, lives at Coleborough. I will take it to him this very day. As this has been going on so long, there is probably no immediate danger of the man's design—if he has the design—being carried into effect. I will let you know the result at once. But what then?"

"Do not ask me. I have thought that out; if I did but know for certain, I could make all safe; of that I am convinced. It will be better that you should know as little as possible."

It was a serious thing this leaving so grave a matter to such young hands; but what the girl had already done showed her worthy of confidence. There was even risk in it to himself. Was it not his duty, if suspicion should be confirmed, to at once invoke the aid of the law? That meant public exposure—shame unspeakable to the very person whose life they were planning to preserve—the ruin of an honourable family.

"We must not condone a crime," he answered meditatively. "It is no less our duty to punish the guilty than to save the innocent."

"The guilty shall be punished; I swear it," replied the girl firmly. "But would this poor woman thank us for her life, if she knew that the man she calls 'the best of husbands' had, under the pretence of nursing her, been compassing her death for weeks? Do think of *her* as well as of him!"

"I am not sure I am right, Ruth; if I asked a lawyer he would say I am wrong. But I will trust you."

"Heaven bless you, Mr. Percy, for those words. You will never have cause to repent of them; you will be thankful for having uttered them." Her face was pale and wet with dew; her hands trembled as she wrapped the jar up in brown paper for her visitor to take with him. "You will ride fast, you will not lose a moment," she cried impatiently.

"My dear Ruth," he answered very gravely, "you must listen to reason. You are overwrought, as it is, and to dwell upon the matter, while it is yet unsettled, will drive you crazy. It is absolutely necessary that you should divorce your mind from it. It is no use my riding fast to Coleborough. Maitland's office closes at two, and no speed could get me there in time to see him. But he shall have the jar to-night, with a letter from me to bespeak urgency, though of course saying nothing of the circumstances, and you shall hear from me to-morrow morning. In

the meantime, if I am to retain my confidence in you, you must promise me to do your best to ignore the matter. You have now other things to think of."

She nodded and faintly smiled. Though the subject of her uncle's crime was monopolising her mind, as well it might be, she had certainly other topics—only less important than it, to engage her attention.

"They are not very cheerful things," she sighed; "but they are better than this thing, and I will try to think of them."

"Then why not talk of them while my horse is getting his corn, of which indeed he will stand in need before the day is out? Have you heard lately from Lawrence?"

"Mrs. Merridew has heard. He seems to be getting on fairly well, and he has found good friends in London."

"In London? I thought he was with Sir Charles Walden."

"No, he has left Hurlby for some time; it was meant to be a secret, but I am sure you deserve his fullest confidence. And after all, what does it matter, what does anything matter, when such things are going on under this very roof."

Mr. Percy looked distressed and disappointed. This outbreak was only too significant of the fever of anxiety and impatience that was con-

suming the poor girl under that thin crust of dismissal she had put on to please him. Such thoughts *could* not be dismissed; all that could be hoped for was mitigation and postponement.

"We do not know these things are going on, Ruth," he answered mildly. "We hope they are not going on, and if they are, we are taking what means lie in our power to put a stop to them. What you tell me of Lawrence is very surprising. Is it decided that he is not going to Singapore, which he seemed to dread so?"

"Nothing is decided; though he has made up his mind, I think, at all hazards, to remain in England. No one here knows anything of his intentions or his movements, save his mother and myself; but he has gone to London in the hope of making a living by his pen."

"And who are these friends of whom you spoke?"

"They are a Mr. Latham and his two sisters. Lawrence was recommended to them by Sir Charles Walden. They seem to have been very kind to him."

"It is a great risk," he murmured; "Lorry is very young, and knows nothing of the world. I mistrust Sir Charles's friends."

"Why?"

"Because I mistrust Sir Charles. You have seen or heard nothing of *him*, I suppose, of late?"

"Nothing at all."

Mr. Percy had looked at her very searchingly as he put that question; but it had evoked no spark of interest, no flush of colour. However monopolising was the leading topic in her mind, if there had been anything serious between her and the baronet, the mention of his name would surely have moved her a little. He was glad that it had not done so. It also left him free to speak his mind about the man.

"I hope Lawrence has not placed himself under obligations to Sir Charles."

"I cannot say that; it would indeed be most ungrateful not to feel them, for he has done him good service; has taken a great deal of trouble—which, as you know, is not his way—in launching him in literature; he has been a true friend to Lawrence."

"But not a patron, I hope. He has not lent him money?"

"No, certainly not. Lorry would not have liked anything of that kind." (There was interest and spirit in her tone for the first time as she said that.) "He put him in the way of earning something just to start with, that is all."

"I had hopes that your aunt, Mrs. Lock, might have left the lad something."

"She had nothing. Good Heavens! until this moment I had clean forgotten, by-the-bye,

that she made me the custodian of some papers. They are of no value, for the poor soul had no property of any kind; but she seemed anxious they should not fall into—into strange hands." She had been about to say "my uncle's hands," but repugnance, or the recollection that the topic was forbidden, restrained her. Mr. Percy attributed it to the latter cause, which gave him pleasure.

"That looks as if the papers *were* valuable," he answered smiling, "or why should she have been so careful? Let me look at them. She left no will, I suppose?"

"She had nothing to leave."

Ruth took the packet Aunt Jerry had given her from her desk, and gave it into Mr. Percy's hands. In the whirl of events which had taken place of late the possession of it had entirely slipped her recollection. If there was anything in it that required action, or even attention, she felt herself utterly unequal to cope with it now.

"Be so good as to take it," she said wearily, "and advise me if anything requires to be done. I feel like a child," then she added with a sweet smile, "and look to you as though you were my father."

"Then I have your permission to open it?"

"Of course. It is only adding a further weight to the peck of troubles which you are undertaking for my sake."

That she should thus express herself was some little proof of improvement of her mind running in a bye stream, away from the main channel.

Mr. Percy opened the packet, and examined its contents, which consisted only of a few documents. They seemed to interest him, however, for he did not speak for some minutes.

"Did your aunt say nothing to you of these papers, besides the injunction to take care of them?"

Ruth started at his voice; the silence had been fatal to her resolution; her thoughts had reverted to the old topic. "I beg your pardon. I did not hear you."

He repeated his question.

"Aunt Jerry told me it was something about some shares in a mine; her husband had said, 'Stick to them.' I do not think she quite knew what she was talking about. She seemed to attach a value to them because of her husband's words, though they were in fact worth nothing. That was the impression she produced on me."

"Just so; and most likely the correct one. I will, however, make inquiries into the matter. Now I must go."

He put the papers in the pocket of his coat, but Ruth's eyes were fixed on the other pocket, which held the marmalade jar. That was the only matter in which she felt an interest. If

she had been told that her whole future would turn on the other it would have made no difference. So it is, indeed, with every life light that goes out amongst us, with which life-long love is not associated. For the moment, for the week, for even the month, the catastrophe is overwhelming. Nothing else is to be compared with it, or seems of any importance. Yet day by day and week by week its impression grows weaker and weaker, and other things take its place; for life is a palimpsest.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE PATRON'S EMISSARY.

Callers were rare in Nelson Crescent. Mr. Latham mixed with society at his club and found it quite enough for him. His sisters would have liked more of it, but the kind of people they would have welcomed would not have been very acceptable to their brother. It was in this matter only that his liberality to them was deficient. "Our dear brother will never ask anybody to the house." This was an advantage to Lawrence in one way, because being almost their only male visitor, the ladies made even more of him than they were naturally inclined to do; but on the other hand it prevented the circle of his own acquaintance from expanding. It was very well for Mr. Latham to be content with meeting friends of his own sex, mostly of his own age, and addicted to the same studious pursuits as himself, but a young fellow who wishes to study life and know the world should have wider opportunities.

Moreover, Lawrence did not belong to a club, and had to make or scrape acquaintances for himself. Some of them, thus casually picked up, he was only too glad to drop again; for Bohemia, prolific in scamps, has, alas! in its picturesque but somewhat barren territories not a few scoundrels.

Mr. Latham did, indeed, introduce him to one or two literary men of a high class, but they were mostly bachelors like himself. Mr. Martyn, however, one of the chief contributors to *The Areopagus*, was a married man, and had a charming wife. Lawrence soon became a great favourite of hers (he had the gift of getting on with nice women), and through her he began to know people worth knowing and to be regarded favourably. He was undoubtedly an interesting young fellow, and, unless in that section of society called "smart people," poverty and inexperience are no bars to social success in London. This led him into no extravagances, while at the same time it did not interfere with his literary work. He read a great deal, and wrote most perseveringly. About nine-tenths of what he wrote came back to him like a boomerang. At first it hurt him, because it struck the bump of self-esteem, which in the young is a tender place; but presently he began to be inured to it, and though far indeed from coinciding with the opinion of his editors, that his contributions were sad rubbish, acknowledged

to himself that there were reasons, if insufficient ones, for their rejection. Sometimes he re-wrote them (when they usually became worse than before; you can't mend blotting-paper), but generally he sent them to lower and lower periodicals (as the Cambridge racket player immortalised by Davey used to make his ball dap on the wall) till at last they found acceptance with *The Penny Trumpet*.

"I see your name, Mr. Merridew, everywhere," observed Mrs. Martyn, in her good-natured way.

"But in very queer places," he answered modestly, and, indeed, not without a blush, for *The Trumpet* was a good advertiser.

"Oh, but you shine in the Zenith as well as the Nadir."

"If you mean *The Areopagus* by the zenith," he replied (which she did because her husband wrote in it), "my appearances are very rare there."

Then he began to tell her, for he was frank as the day (which was one of the reasons of his popularity), and, like all young writers, loved to talk shop, what he did write for, and what he got.

"But you don't mean to say that you get twenty times—literally twenty times more from *The Areopagus* than what you say you get from *The Trumpet?*"

"Yes, I do; literally, exactly."

"Why, that's more than my husband gets," exclaimed the lady, which (her tone seemed to say) was outrageous.

"Oh, but," said Lorry hastily, "Mr. Latham alters my articles very much, and, indeed, they are as much his as mine."

"But that is a reason why he should give you less, not more," she answered. The position was incontrovertible.

Lawrence blamed his own want of reticence, and then, as he thought of the matter afterwards, a more serious consideration even than the mischief he might have done obtruded itself. Though he had a good conceit of himself, he could not but put the question, "Why should I be paid more than Mr. Martyn, who in literature is far my superior?" His wife, as if to make amends for her astonishment, had said in her pleasant way, "You come under the most-favoured-nation clause, indeed!" And could it be that he *was* favoured? Did Mr. Latham pay him more than he was worth because he liked him, or because he was poor? The bare supposition of such a thing wounded him to the quick. Then he remembered that for his first article, a very short one, written from Hillsland before Mr. Latham had so much as seen him, that gentleman had sent him ten pounds. It could not, therefore, be charity that he had been receiving; and yet it was very strange that he should get more

than Mr. Martyn. It was a subject that he could hardly broach to Mr. Latham; the editor of *The Areopagus* always shrank from pecuniary matters, and it would be odious to him to hear that his rate of payment for contributions had been the subject of discussion. On the very morning that Lawrence was puzzling himself with this riddle, a visitor called in Nelson Crescent who could have answered it for him, and whose mission, indeed, had some relation to that very matter.

It was a visitor whom certainly Mr. Latham did not expect, but he was not unknown to him, a most respectable, taciturn-looking person, who might have been a divine, or a Buddhist of the first degree, or an undertaker—in fact Sir Charles Walden's very private secretary, Mr. Harbord.

Mr. Latham had no great regard for this gentleman, whom he suspected of knowing more of his friend's concerns than any man ought to know of another's, that is to say of being privy to matters that, like "faith and prayers" (though at the same time exceedingly unlike them), should be "among the privatest of men's affairs;" an instrument only too ready to his hand in transactions which are best let alone and in which it behoves no man to be an accessory. Perhaps he did him wrong, for the editor of *The Areopagus* was peculiar in his views of his fellow-

creatures. Very charitable, not to say stone blind to the errors of those he liked, he had a great distaste for sinners who had not the advantage of his acquaintance, or who mixed in either a higher or a lower plane than himself. Friendship atoned for a good deal with him; gratitude, short-lived in most souls, was in his very tenacious of existence; but for human weaknesses of the lower kind in outside people he had much secret abhorrence. He had a suspicion that the modest and retiring Mr. Harbord was a low lot.

"Hullo! *you* in London," was his not very hospitable greeting. "I thought you were a fixture at Hurlby, like the heirlooms."

Mr. Harbord smiled as though his being likened to an heirloom, and at Hurlby, was rather a compliment than otherwise. "It is not often I am in town," he owned, "but just now a little business, if I may call it so, has called me up."

Mr. Latham looked at him with such disfavour that one might have thought the phrase "called up" had reminded him of the devil.

"What is it now?" he said; "some mischief, I'll be bound."

"Far from it, I assure you. Sir Charles left word that I should see you as soon as possible after his departure."

"Departure! Where's he gone to? I thought he was at Hurlby."

"No, he has gone abroad."

"Abroad! Why, I had a letter from him a week ago, without a word of his going abroad in it."

"It was rather sudden. Circumstances beyond his control precipitated it."

"Some very agreeable circumstance, no doubt," said Mr. Latham with scornful irritation.

"I never said—that is, I know nothing about it."

"What an infernal fool he is," exclaimed the other, with apparent inconsequence. "There is no fool like an old fool."

"That is a matter which you can scarcely expect me to discuss, Mr. Latham," said the secretary mildly.

"Quite right. I was a fool myself to make to you, of all men, such an obvious observation. And it was also unbecoming. Well?"

"Sir Charles asked me to say, as it is probable he may be away for some considerable time and will not be corresponding with him, that he would like, if possible, some provision—some permanent provision—to be made for a young gentleman in whom he feels a great deal of interest, Mr. Lawrence Merridew. If it could be done without his becoming aware of who was his benefactor, through some means connected with literature, he would be particularly obliged."

"Make him a bogus offer of £1000 for one of his sketches of London life, I suppose?"

"Just so, something of that nature," said Mr. Harbord imperturbably.

"I will be a party to no such duplicity," said Mr. Latham hotly. "You may tell Sir Charles —since he does not condescend to communicate with me personally upon the subject—that I repent what I have done for him in this matter already."

"One moment," interposed Mr. Harbord, with unexpected and indeed unexampled promptness. "I should have said at first, but that I thought it impossible for you to have taken umbrage in the case of so old a friend, that time did not admit of Sir Charles seeing you; while to write of the thing was—well—letters sometimes fall into other hands than those they are intended for. The matter is a delicate one."

"Then let him undertake it himself; he has more tact than I have."

"There are reasons which make it impossible that Sir Charles could—just now—enter into personal relations with Mr. Merridew. Any overtures from him, however generous, would be misconstrued."

"Good Heavens! Sir Charles has not run off with Miss What's-her-name, Merridew's cousin, surely!"

"Dear, dear, how could such an idea enter

your mind!" exclaimed Mr. Harbord in a tone of great distress. "Most certainly not."

"I am glad to hear it, for let me tell you, and you may tell your—I mean Sir Charles—that if anything of that nature had taken place, he and I would have had nothing more to say to one another. I have a great regard for Mr. Merridew."

"Surely, surely, and so has Sir Charles, as indeed he has demonstrated. His only desire is to benefit him."

"Then let him do it in a straightforward fashion. As I was about to say, I already repent, not indeed of having assisted this young man—far from it—but of having done so by underhand means. The giving him larger sums for his contributions than they were worth, however well intended, was an error, and you may tell Walden that it must come to an end. It has put this young man in a fool's paradise. He is working hard and getting on, but he naturally imagines he is doing better than he is. If it was only himself who was concerned, as I thought was the case when Sir Charles proposed the plan, there would have been no great harm in it, but the lad is trying to make a home for his mother and a cousin, to whom, I understand, he is engaged to be married."

"Oh, is he?" exclaimed Mr. Harbord with great interest and in a tone of relief; "then that will simplify matters."

"I don't see how. On the contrary, it seems to me to complicate them. I say, considering the difficulties and responsibilities with which the young man is surrounded, it is abominable to keep him in the dark as to his true position. I suppose I must tell him that *The Areopagus* can't afford to pay so well as it did."

"That is easy enough," observed Mr. Harbord naïvely.

"Easy as lying always is to some people," retorted Mr. Latham, "but it is also a humiliation, though *that*, too, some people find it easy to stomach."

"Very true," assented the other, nodding his head as if in assent to some abstract proposition. "I'll write to Sir Charles what you say."

"Upon my life, you are a cool hand," exclaimed Mr. Latham, not without a touch of admiration.

"I never allow sentiment to interfere with business, that is all," answered the other modestly; "I cannot afford it. Sir Charles can."

"*I* know," said Mr. Latham, amused in spite of himself. "His recent departure from our shores is probably not altogether disconnected with it? *Cherchez la femme*, eh?"

"I am unacquainted with the French language," returned Mr. Harbord regretfully. "Then I am to say that you decline to be Sir Charles's almoner altogether, even to the extent

that you have hitherto been. It seems hard on Mr. Merridew."

"It *seems* hard; but, as I have said, it would, in my opinion, be harder on him to continue any further deception. This is unintelligible to you, no doubt. I am afraid you may not make the case quite clear to Sir Charles. If you will give me his address I will write to him myself."

"I do not know Sir Charles's address. I believe he has gone to Naples, but he does not wish any letters to be forwarded."

"Then I have nothing more to say," said Mr. Latham—"except," the extreme dryness of his tone seemed to suggest, "that you are the greatest liar in Europe."

"I am sure I was right," said the editor when he found himself alone, "though I believe Walden's regard for our friend to be perfectly genuine. But there is something strange in his employing this fellow as his intermediary. What could he have meant by saying that his master's generosity might be misconstrued by our young friend? that it might be rejected is obvious enough, but why misconstrued?"

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE LAST RESORT.

The day is over at last with its painful service, never grudged before, in the sick-room. The doctor has been, and the matter of the porridge has been once more discussed: he is still of opinion that it should be persisted in, but if the invalid's dislike of it continues, a strong soup is to be substituted, which "the best of husbands" undertakes to administer to his Popsy with his own hands. As he brings her the porridge again (of which she takes a few spoonfuls with loathing), Ruth marvels to see them so white and clean; so highly wrought and abnormal is her nervous condition that she looks for blood upon them. She notes, however, keenly enough that "dearest Robert" never suffers the cup to leave his hands, and takes it, with what is left, away with him. In other matters he is not so careful to save trouble. It is surely impossible that she has awakened suspicion; yet Uncle Robert speaks to her with unwonted gentleness, remarks on her wearied and

anxious looks (as well he may), and drops a hint that it may be necessary to send her somewhere for a few days to recruit her health. She finds herself assenting with a smile, that seems to tear her cheek, and he pats it—and she bears even that—with approbation, and wishes his Popsy were as sensible.

This nightmare of the day is worse than that of the night; but the night is hideous. When exhaustion compels her at last to sleep, the story of the day goes on, and she wakes with a cry of "Murder!" The innocent morn breaks with song of bird and scent of flower; the sun kisses the grey lake and makes it young again; but freshness and beauty have lost their charms for her. She sits at the open window, and sees nothing but the winding road, along which no messenger can come for hours. Yet if she missed him, if by any chance the note he bears should fall into other hands—*his* hands! That idea is terrible. She grudges every glance that is cast elsewhere. The breakfast the maid brings up to her—for to descend and meet the eyes and answer the questions of her relatives is now beyond her power—lies untasted on the table. But she knows all that man can do Mr. Percy has done; that urgency has been insisted upon, secrecy maintained; he is a friend in whom she can trust. Oh! fools and blind who assert that man is independent of his fellows, and can dispense with

their sympathy and help; they can almost as easily dispense with God's help. But for that perfect confidence Ruth must have lost her wits.

Her door is locked, and when Mrs. Merridew comes to ask after her she replies as if from her bed. She can see no one, think of no one, except that unknown messenger. It is like waiting for death. At last he comes: a man upon the black cob, which is never ridden as she knows by any but his master, but which has for once been entrusted to another. It is early in the afternoon, but she runs unbonneted down a little staircase that leads to a side door, and out into the blinding sunshine; this is foolish of her, because it may cause comment, but she dare not return for headgear. As the messenger draws nigh she pretends to be gathering flowers, and as he nears her looks up, as if with curiosity, shading her eyes with her trembling hand. He draws rein at once, and with a satisfied air, like one who fulfils a mission with unexpected facility, says, "Miss Stratton, I believe; master has bidden me give this letter into your own hand." She takes out her scanty purse, and though she feels inclined to empty its whole contents into his hand, gives him but half-a-crown.

Her fear is he will put up his horse for a rest, as the custom is with a friend's groom, and have a chat with the servants; but Mr. Percy has thought of that. The man has orders to

leave another letter at another country house by one o'clock, where ale is also to be got, and better than is brewed at Hillsland Hall. The groom, well pleased, touches his hat, turns round and gallops off, as unconscious of the importance of the message he has brought as any postman. She crumples up the note in her hand and flies back to her room. The meeting she has looked forward to with such anxious impatience for four-and-twenty hours has not taken two minutes. But it is some time before she opens the note. She has fallen on her knees first and prayed to her Heavenly Father that He might see fit to prove her awful suspicions baseless. He does not see fit. The note is but a slip of paper signed by the public analyst: "The porridge contains antimony, a slow poison."

There was not one word beside; but she had made up her mind, as she had told Mr. Percy, what to do in case this very thing should come to pass, and he had had confidence in her judgment and left her to do it. It was well that there was no need for consideration now, for there was no time to spare for plan-making, nor had she any longer the head for it; it was clear enough, but—like a weapon apt for striking, but useless for defence—it was fit for action only. She sat down, however, and wrote these few lines in a firm hand:—

"It has been discovered that you have been

attempting to murder your wife by poison. The porridge made by your own hand and offered by it to her yesterday was not thrown away as you were told. It has been sent to the public analyst, and he has found antimony in it. You will be given twelve hours from the moment that you have read this exactly. Then the law will take its course."

She placed this in an envelope and directed it to her uncle, and then put it in her bosom. It must be given to him with her own hands. Even without that he would have known from whom it came by her handwriting, but she wished him to know. There was personal danger to herself in such an act, there was no knowing to what extremity rage and despair might drive him; but that consideration never crossed her mind.

Luncheon was already over, and she found that her uncle had been making inquiries about her, and had been present at it; perhaps he would not have been had she been there. It was her desire to see him alone, but she found this difficult. He remained in his father's room occupied, it was said, with business matters; and then he went out of doors without, as was his wont, first paying a visit to the sick-room. It seemed as though, warned by some instinct of danger such as wild beasts possess, he was purposely avoiding her. It was fortunate for him (as she thought) that the time that was to be

allowed for his escape had been left in her own hands (she had not the least doubt that he would use it as was intended, and not brave the matter out); had the twelve hours dated from the moment Mr. Percy had known the worst, the man would have had small chance indeed.

Ruth had been with the invalid the whole afternoon, awaiting him, and it was almost evening when she heard his step in the passage. She passed quickly through the ante-room, and stopped him as he stood on the threshold with the cup in his hand—just as had happened before. But this time there was something in her look that alarmed him, and as though fearing she would take the cup, he mechanically withheld it from her.

"Put it down," she said, pointing to a little table that had stood outside the room since his wife had been taken ill, for convenience' sake, to hold trays and phials; "here is a letter for you."

"A letter?" he stammered.

"Read it." As she spoke the words she did not recognise her own voice. Then she added "Go;" the resonant word seemed to echo in the long gallery, and to be taken up again in the great hall on to which it looked. Then she closed the door upon him—in his face—and shut him out for ever. She listened, but though she heard no footsteps, she felt that he was no

longer there—sure, as though she had seen his livid and fear-stricken face, that he had read the letter and slunk away; that she had done with him.

Time went on, but there was no inquiry about him. Only one person was likely to inquire; the sick woman had done so an hour or two ago, finding him later than usual, but not altogether sorry perhaps that the loathsome nourishment he brought with him was delayed, she had dropped asleep. She looked worse than she had ever looked, so far as health was concerned, but otherwise more comely; exhaustion and want of sustenance had given her a delicate appearance and idealised such attractions as she possessed. In Ruth she awoke an unspeakable compassion when in a faint voice she presently asked, "Where is dear Robert?" The girl was unable to reply. Her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. Mrs. Merridew, who was in the room, exclaimed—

"I can't think, I'm sure," with unwonted irritation, for to do him justice, it was not Robert's way to thus neglect his wife. "I'll go out and inquire where he is."

She had not gone long, and came back with a cheerful face. "He will be here very shortly, my dear."

Ruth's heart sank within her. He was going to brave it out, then, after all. But as

Popsy, with knitted brow, turned her wan face to the wall with a sigh of impatience, Mrs. Merridew whispered in her niece's ear, "It is very strange, but they tell me that your uncle has gone to bathe in the lake. John saw him going there with a towel in his hand. It is so late for bathing. What is the matter, Ruth? You look as white as a sheet."

"My headache has come on again. I am afraid I must go back to my room."

Ruth knew at once what was about to happen—probably, indeed, *had* happened. It horrified her, of course; she felt the shock in every fibre of her frame. But if she could have averted the catastrophe she would not have done it. It was better that this sinful wretch should have fallen into God's hands than into man's. If allowance could be made for him, He would make it, as it would be made by no earthly tribunal. Ruth was a woman, and a very broken-hearted one, but from the milk-and-water sentiment that weeps over ruthless ruffians, and ignores their victims, she was free. She had confidence in the All-Wise. She did not assume that a soul is lost because it is "hurried into eternity," whether by a man's own act or another's.

It was a terrible alternative, no doubt, but it was better so, not only for the man himself, but —what was of greatly more consequence—for

the innocent and unsuspecting woman he had plotted to destroy, and for the family on whom his earthly punishment would have brought shame and ruin. It might even be said that Robert Stratton's end became him as nothing in his life had done; it was a crime, but one that was calculated to benefit his fellow-creatures. His leaving the world had been a legacy of good to it, while his remaining in it would have been the source of widespread and insupportable misery. To the eyes of common sense—though it was not through them that Ruth regarded it—it was the very best thing, though only of very bad things, that could have happened. She had pictured him flying from the hands of justice, residing in this or that Alsatia of scoundrelism, appearing and disappearing, caught and uncaught, always a menace and terror to his unhappy wife, and all belonging to him. This at least would be spared her.

She sat in her room awaiting the discovery of what had happened, like one who has already received a telegram and awaits details. She knew what had happened as though she had seen it. It was a moonlit night, and when the squire did not return, they sought for him as though it had been day. They found his clothes upon the lake shore. In some cases this would not have been final; there have been men who have had sufficient reason for effacing themselves

who have made believe to die, and gone away, in hopes to begin life again without encumbrance or with impunity from their transgressions, but Robert Stratton—or so his niece concluded—was not of this class. He was too masterful, too insolent by nature, to endure so humiliating a position—moreover, the lake was not the sea. Indeed, before morning dawned the drag-nets found him. He was a strong swimmer, but the evening was chill, and no doubt, thought all the world (save two persons), the cramp had seized him.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

NEWS INDEED.

On the second morning after the catastrophe at Hillsland Hall, Lawrence received a letter, but not from home. It was a foreign letter; the handwriting of it was familiar enough, but its postmark, "Naples," astonished him not a little. What on earth could have taken Kitty Salesby to Naples? It had no address on it, and was without its usual beginning: no "dear Lawrence," nor even "dear Mr. Merridew," which, indeed, would have been almost as strange as none. It might have been a memorandum. "When you have received this it will be the last time that you will hear from me, and, as I would vainly hope, hear *of* me. I shall be dead to you, and, what is worse, disgraced. If you think of me at all—and it is better not—you need not think of me as being as miserable as I deserve to be. If I am not happy, I never expected to be so, and I am not less so than I should have been had I been your wife: my future is secured.

There are many women who, with the man they love, could patiently endure all the stings and sorrows of poverty. This is not my case. You will say 'Then what can such a woman's love be worth?' And you will be quite right. You are loved by a far worthier woman. I pray—no I dare not do that—I hope and believe that you will be happy with her. All that I ask is that you will never speak to her of me when she has become your wife. It is strange that one like me should shrink from what is said of me, but I do shrink from that. Spare me for the sake of old times, and also, for the sake of them, forget me."

This then was the reason why for days he had not heard from Hillsland. Kitty had fled from her home, under what circumstances it was only too easy to guess, but with whom? She had always been reticent to him concerning her own affairs. He was not even aware that she had an acquaintance outside her own sphere of life or her immediate neighbourhood. The hints she had dropped to him from time to time of her liking for luxury and wealth had seemed to him to be of the most abstract kind; that she should have had any particular design in her mind with respect to any individual had never entered his head. If she had married a rich man he could have borne it. She had frankly told him—as, indeed, she now repeated—that his love would

not reconcile her to the endurance of poverty; but that she should have preferred a life of gilded shame (for to that his quick intelligence perceived at once her letter pointed) to the humble, but honest, livelihood his love could have provided for her was wormwood to him. His affections were not so much wounded as his *amour propre*—he felt not only injured, but insulted. What, if he had been writing of another person, as a professional story-teller, he would have described as very significant of his state of mind, he felt Kitty's reference to his cousin as an insult. What right had a woman who had so disgraced herself to express an opinion even in the way of commendation of a girl like Ruth? Of course, she was a worthless woman, but the statement from such lips was, to say the least of it, an impertinence. Those lips, however, had not, so far as he was concerned, been forsworn. She had never promised to marry him, though he was sure she had at one time loved him. Was it the eyes of that love —of jealous love—that had recognised what he had been blind to, that Ruth herself loved him? And had they seen aright? That he found himself thinking of *that* matter was also very significant. It often happens that when a gentleman is thrown over by lady No. 1, that he is induced by pique to turn an occasional glance in the direction of lady No. 2 or, indeed,

any number. He is not very particular about the existence of much previous affection. But in this case there was a young lady who had been always No. 2, and only second in his regard to No. 1. If he had not been a fool, Sir Charles had hinted to him more than once, Ruth *would* have been his No. 1. The baronet had, as we know, expressed his opinion to him that Ruth was every way, even in beauty, Kitty's superior, while pointing out to him the folly and impracticability of his passion for Kitty. And Sir Charles was certainly a good judge of his fellow-creatures, especially the female portion of them. How he would smile to himself when he came to hear of this termination of his "love affair," as he had always somewhat contemptuously termed it. Not that he would not be sorry for the poor girl, for he was a kind-hearted fellow, but it would corroborate the opinion he had always had of her unsuitability for his young friend, and we all like our sagacity proved by demonstration.

Lawrence felt that his next interview with that Patron of Letters, as Mr. Latham called him, would be very embarrassing. That he should have thought of Sir Charles at all, under such circumstances, showed that he was not so very hard hit; that his anger was at least as strong as his sense of loss; but he did think about him and also, and much more, of Ruth.

It struck him for the first time that he had not been so grateful to her as he ought to have been, for the countless kindnesses she had done him. He had taken them too much as a matter of course. He had entertained, it is true, the very highest opinion of her, and had been intensely indignant at the idea of Sir Charles paying court to her. That had been rather a dog-in-the-manger feeling, had it not? Well, he was not now quite so sure of that. There was one sentence in Kitty's letter which, while on the one hand it gave him satisfaction, on the other disgusted him more than all the rest; it seemed to have been interpolated into the epistle, and was out of harmony with the remainder; it might have been written for his comfort, and upon the whole he thought it was; but it might have been the naïve and unconscious expression of self-content: "My future is provided for." This did away with much of the apprehension he would otherwise have entertained on her account, but with it much of the bitterness and sorrow. How absolutely impossible was it that under similar circumstances (themselves, however, impossible) his cousin could have so expressed herself. Thus his reflection continued, flying from Ruth to Kitty, from Kitty to Ruth, but always with a tendency—as a "homing" pigeon can only with difficulty be taught to fly both ways—to remain with the latter. If

that result, as no doubt it was, had been Kitty's object, she had succeeded. Work for *The Areopagus* (which always strained his powers) was utterly out of the question that morning, and even *The Penny Trumpet* went without its usual "copy."

He threw down his pen as he seldom did, however indisposed for intellectual exertion, and took his way to Nelson Crescent. He was in a frame of mind—depressed, dissatisfied with himself, in trouble—when the society of kindly, honest gentlewomen is especially attractive; he had not the least intention of making confidantes of either Miss Latham, but the knowledge of the existence of sympathy, even if not asked, is comforting; and Lawrence Merridew in heart, as indeed in years, was still little more than a boy. As he entered the house, the door of Mr. Latham's sanctum, always inviolate to callers in the morning, was opened by that gentleman himself.

"Come in, Lawrence," he said, "I want to have a few words with you."

The editor was always kindly to the young fellow, but it was the first time Merridew noticed he had called him by his Christian name. In his voice too there was a gentle gravity that did not escape the latter's ear. If his literary talents were but moderate, Lawrence Merridew had the faculty of observation highly developed.

"Sit down and take a cigar; there is nothing like tobacco for putting a man at ease both with himself and his friend."

"I am always at ease with you, Mr. Latham; if too much so, it must be laid to the door of your own kindness."

"That is nicely said. I don't wonder at Sir Charles liking you. All generous natures exaggerate little services; and when you say a gracious thing, you mean it, which is deuced rare. We are friends, as you say, and I am about to take the liberty of a friend. I want to know how you are getting on in the world—exactly. You make your own living, of course?"

"Oh, yes; I have even put something by: so small that it is not worth mentioning. But I make more one week almost always than the week before. Some people might call it hard work, but it is a labour of love. I am never so happy as when I have my pen in my hand, though what it writes is, I dare say, often very sad stuff."

"It does vary," said Mr. Latham comically.

"I hope so," returned Lawrence, with an answering smile. "Sometimes my highest aspiration is that in the revolving years I may one day write a successful shilling shocker."

"That is modest, at all events."

"Yes; but depressing. On the other hand I sometimes feel as if I had really some good

stuff in me; but for that—— But you know all about it."

"I know something about it. But go on, you are always frank, and yet I see you have something on your mind. If it is anything about your work let me hear it."

Here, it struck Lawrence, was an opportunity to make a clean breast of it, as respected *The Areopagus*. If his conversation with Mrs. Martyn should ever come to Mr. Latham's ears, he felt it would annoy him exceedingly; but it was such a delicate subject.

"It is nothing about my work."

"Well then, I will say what I have got to say. What would be your reply if somebody was to offer you £1,000 for a one volume novel, the subject to be selected by yourself?"

"I should say he was playing a very poor joke upon me."

"But if he was serious in his offer?"

"Then I should say that under the transparent pretence of buying a book of me, he was giving me £1,000."

"Well?"

"In that case, I hope—indeed, I am quite sure—that I would not take it. I should be making a very good bargain, but at the cost of my self-respect. If you are really serious, Mr. Latham, such a proposition can have been made only by one man. It is prompted, no doubt, by

the noblest generosity, but I had hoped from what he knows of me——" The colour rose to the young man's cheek, his eyes were full of tears, that *amour propre* of his, of which he had a great and, indeed, unusual supply, was wounded for the second time that morning.

"Then we will say no more about it," said Mr. Latham kindly.

"But, indeed, sir, I should like to have something said, to Sir Charles I mean; I will write myself to Hurlby."

"No, no; let the matter drop. It was only a tentative experiment, and I am glad it has resulted as it has done. I felt that it would be so. It will not be repeated, you may be quite sure. And it is no use you writing to Hurlby, for Walden has gone abroad, to Naples, I believe, but he has left no address."

"To Naples!" repeated Lawrence in a low, hoarse voice. "Great Heavens; then it is he who is the villain."

"The villain! Well, really—of all the names—what the deuce is the matter with you, my poor boy?"

"Oh, nothing, sir," replied the lad, with a feeble smile, and speaking with exceeding bitterness. "I have only lost a friend; or found the difference between a friend and a patron. He has seduced a girl in our village for whom he knew I had a regard, and gone away with her;

and now he offers me £1,000 as a *solatium*. It was well done, indeed, and like a gentleman."

Mr. Latham looked very distressed and embarrassed. "This is sad news, Lawrence. If it be true, I have nothing to say except that Sir Charles Walden was at one time my friend, and I am quite sure *your* friend: that he had no other motive, certainly no mean one, for the interest he took in you, save a genuine regard."

"I believe that, I *feel* that," answered Lawrence slowly, "and that is what makes it so much the worse for *me*. There is nothing, as you say, to be said of this man; no sort of excuse, no palliation; I have done with him. All that remains is to rid myself of all that is possible in the way of obligation. You know more about this than I do. I suspect—even as regards *The Areopagus*——"

"There is no need to suspect anything," put in Mr. Latham quickly. "I will make a clean breast of it; Walden wrote to me to help you by whatever means I could. He suggested that I might pay you a little higher for your contributions than I should perhaps have done upon their merits. It was wrong of me, I feel that now; the difference was, after all, but small, and your contributions have been very few. It is not worth thinking about."

"I should like to know—exactly, if you

please—what the difference was," said Lawrence. "It must be returned to him."

"That shall be done, only remember that henceforth, if you cease to offer me any articles, I shall conclude you have not forgiven me. If our business relations close—in which there will certainly be no favouritism—it will interfere with our friendship."

"You are very good to me, Mr. Latham."

"If I am, it is from the angelic character of my disposition, and not because I owe you any compensation; fix that in your mind, please, and let us have done with this disagreeable subject. Something has occurred of far more importance, and which affects you very nearly. You have not, I suppose, read the newspapers this morning. Well, there is something in them concerning a relative of yours. It is bad news. Your mother writes to me——"

"Nothing has happened to Ruth?" exclaimed Lawrence, with feverish anxiety.

"No," said Latham smiling; "I don't think your gentle emotions, from what you have told me, will be severely tried by the occurrence, but your Uncle Robert is dead."

CHAPTER XL.

WISE AT LAST.

There is a general impression in the world that when a man is dead all that was evil in him is, among persons of charitable disposition at least, forgotten as well as forgiven; that the phrase *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* applies not only to the speech of his fellow-creatures, or at least the worthier portion of them, but to their thought.

There is nothing more false than this idea, which is moreover ridiculous. Memory is not destroyed in us by the death of another, though it may temper our judgment of them with mercy. In the case of Robert Stratton, the Latin proverb would have been difficult indeed to work out in practice, from the complete absence of the *bonum* in his character; the nearest approach to it was to keep silence. Lawrence Merridew was of a kindly disposition, certainly not of a revengeful one—but the lines of the French poet with reference to the tomb would have applied to him—

"Rien jusqu'ici poursuivre une mémoire,
Rien excepté la vérité;"

and the truth was not to be spoken.

"Robert dead?" he said, "how did that happen?" For not having heard of his being ill, he naturally ascribed his decease to accident.

"He was drowned in the lake while bathing."

"Good Heavens!" Even this expression of sorrowful amazement was not, it seemed, evoked by the occurrence, for he immediately said: "How dreadful it will be for my poor mother and Ruth to be left with Aunt Jane."

"It is not that reflection, let us hope," said Mr. Latham, "that caused your mother to take the step she has done; though on another account one might almost wish it were. The fact is, your cousin Ruth has been seriously affected—upset, I suppose, as she well might be—by this painful catastrophe."

"I will go down to Hillsland at once," said Lawrence, rising from his chair.

"That is unnecessary, my good fellow, for your mother is bringing your cousin up with her to town. The doctor has insisted on it. They will arrive this very evening."

"And they don't write me one word about it," said Lawrence in an injured voice.

"We must not think about ourselves," observed Mr. Latham gently, "when one's dear

ones are in trouble. Your mother had no doubt her reasons for writing to us—for my sister has also got a letter from her—it was probably to save time, of which there was none to lose, and of course she knew I should communicate with you."

"They will come, of course, to my lodgings at once," exclaimed the young fellow excitedly. "There are two rooms there to let. They will live with me. I will work for them as no man has worked before. Poverty will have no terrors for them compared with what they have suffered. Poor as the fare will be that I may give them, it will not be so bitter as the bread of dependence."

Mr. Latham smiled, for the young fellow not only looked confidence itself, in his powers to maintain his relations, but also exceedingly happy.

"I am afraid your hospitality cannot just at present be accepted. Your cousin will require a good deal of attention and comforts such as she would hardly find at Mrs. Levison's. Your mother has told my sisters the sort of lodging—'the more permanent or likely to be permanent,' she says, 'the better'—she will require, and they are gone out to look for them."

"That is like their kindness, but—well, I am sure they will understand that it is only the urgency of the case which has caused my mother to encroach upon it."

"Encroach? Why, it's the sort of errand

they both delight in. They will increase their information about their neighbours, patronise them, order things from the shops—it's their notion of a liberal education. It's a compliment, too, for it shows you have given her a good account of their judgment."

"My only fear is that my dear mother, who has had nothing to do with housekeeping for years, may overrate her resources. For the present, of course, my cousin's health is the one thing to be considered, but as to permanency, I fear——"

"My dear Lawrence, you are a very clever fellow," interrupted Mr. Latham, smiling, "but I don't think you understand these matters as well as my sisters. They will cut their coat according to the cloth, of the dimensions of which they have had full instructions. We will let you know where your folk are to be found this evening, they will be met at the station, of course, but not by you; your cousin's condition precludes the display of emotion in public—and I wish everybody else's condition did. And now my advice to you is to go home and do a good day's work; it is the best panacea for troubles and anxieties of all kinds, and in your case should be an earnest of your future. If you can't use your pen, because you are not happy in your mind, you should not have entered the literary calling."

There was an authority in Mr. Latham's tone,

such as he had never used before, and the good sense of his advice was undeniable.

Lawrence went back to his lodgings, and after a severe struggle got interested in his theme: a small matter it may be thought, or possibly even a discreditable one, but his success was in fact a matter of great importance. For as the editor had hinted, if a man who means to live by his pen has not the power of putting away sorrow, or joy, nay even anxiety and despair itself from his heart—or at all events from his head—when work demands it, he had better give up his calling at once, for he has proved himself unfitted for it. Lawrence worked with a will, and the thought that he was working for others gave a spur to his exertions.

At six o'clock word came to him that his people had arrived in Cheshunt Street, a locality midway between his lodgings and Nelson Crescent. Full as his mind was of the coming meeting, he noticed as he stood at the door that the house was a large one, and had flowers in the windows, which is not usual at that end of the town; and it gave him pleasure, for he felt that to country eyes this would be a welcome.

His mother received him with open arms and many tears.

"We have been in great trouble, as you know, Lorry. What has happened shocked us all, of course, but it has affected dear Ruth in a

manner we did not expect; we had no idea she was so emotional. I am afraid that this evening she is too utterly fatigued and worn out to see you. Don't look so disappointed, my darling," —for his face had lengthened considerably—"at having only your poor old mother to talk to."

Lawrence responded in a manner that soon procured his forgiveness: and indeed his heart had smitten him. The young fellow with all his "fancies," as she termed what was unintelligible to her in him, she was well aware dearly loved her, and was remorseful enough at the bare thought of having wounded her. She told him the whole story of what had happened at Hillsland (so far as she knew it). It was very shocking, of course, but even upon herself it had not produced a more terrible effect than upon dear Ruth. The poor widow, who, strange to say, however, seemed, so far as her ailment was concerned, no worse, kept murmuring to herself, "The best of husbands, the best of husbands!" Ruth could not bear to hear it, though since he was gone there was now no harm in such an hallucination. Of course, it would have been her duty under such circumstances to stay by the invalid, especially as Jane's ministrations were not welcome to her, but they had left her perforce. Moreover, two of Mrs. Robert's sisters had been telegraphed for, and were to arrive that day. The doctor had

resolutely insisted upon Ruth's immediate departure from the scene of the catastrophe.

"A wise resolve," put in Lawrence, "but from what I remember of the man I wonder he had the good sense—and, indeed, the courage in the face of Aunt Jane—to propose it."

"Oh, but Jane was not averse," said Mrs. Merridew naïvely; "as her sisters-in-law were coming we were not indispensable, and, indeed, I think she was rather pleased to get rid of us."

"Then I applaud her for the first time in my life," said Lawrence gravely, "but especially the doctor."

"Well," said Mrs. Merridew hesitating, and with a little flush, "there was somebody behind him who I fancied suggested the idea, and certainly advocated it very strongly — Mr. Percy."

"Mr. Percy? Oh, how good of him—and how like him—to come to you in your trouble."

"Yes, he was with us the whole day; indeed, both days. He took everything on his shoulders, for you know what your poor grandfather is, how little fitted for domestic emergencies."

"*I* know," said Lawrence, in no very appreciative tone.

"So Mr. Percy was invaluable. He took a particular interest in dear Ruth, who, you

remember, was always a favourite of his, and not only planned our departure, but suggested our writing to Miss Latham."

"And *Mr.* Latham," added Lawrence, in a reproachful tone. "Why was it not I who was written to?"

"Well, we had so little time, dear," said his mother confusedly, "and there were matters of business, and business is not in your way, you know."

On ordinary occasions the young fellow might have taken this for a compliment; not to be a man of business being half-way, as some suppose, to being a man of letters; but he was not pleased at his help or advice not being asked, it seemed to be treating him like a boy.

Mrs. Merridew was distressed to see him hurt, but not sorry that his sense of wrong prevented him from further inquiry into this matter. She was, in fact, using a certain duplicity, of course for his own good, but she was not an adept at frauds, even pious frauds. As hens will fight with hawks for the sake of their little ones, so will mothers undertake, for their children's sake, rôles for which nature has not designed them. She had a little secret confided to her, but was not without a well-grounded apprehension that it might be worried out of her, or indeed that she might herself have disclosed it: and she was therefore glad that her

Lawrence was too "huffy" about those business matters to be inquisitive.

When he came the next afternoon to Cheshunt Street by appointment he had quite got over that little soreness: was, to do him justice, not thinking of himself at all, but looking forward to his meeting with his cousin with no little embarrassment and confusion. He had been thinking of her a good deal, in the interim, and "putting two and two together"—all that he could recollect of her sayings and doings in relation to him—with a very decided inclination to join one and one. How was it possible he could have been such a fool as to have been blind—well, to her merits, but especially to one of them, that steadfast and faithful regard for him, which she had shown in a hundred ways? How ungrateful he had been to her! How she had pleaded for him in vain with his persecutors as a child; how she had stood by him against them when he was a boy, and mitigated by her sympathy the evils she could not avert! How she had for his sake admitted Sir Charles Walden to terms of intimacy, and aided his interest in him by her gracious influence! This had caused even Mr. Percy, he remembered, to couple her name with that of the baronet in a fashion that had then aroused his indignation, but now filled him with shame. And then the thought of Kitty—which was the worst thought of all. It

would only serve him right, and be the natural result of his idiotic conduct, if Ruth had learnt to forget him.

But Ruth seemed to remember him quite well. She had risen at mid-day, it appeared, though still very weak and tottery, especially to receive him, in the drawing-room; her withdrawal from the scene, where she had played so prominent though unsought a part, had already benefited her, notwithstanding the physical fatigue of her long journey; her excessive nervousness had disappeared, and though her black attire heightened the delicacy of her appearance, he thought he had never seen her looking so lovely. She held out both her hands to him from the sofa without the slightest trace of embarrassment, and when, moved by an uncontrolled impulse, he stooped down and kissed her forehead, she took it as the most natural thing in the world, a circumstance that made him very wretched. Of course, she looked upon him as a cousin, or at the best a brother, and had no reason to feel astonishment. Neither of them referred to the cause that had brought them so unexpectedly together—Ruth, because the subject was hateful to her, and he, because it was of very small consequence compared with that which was in his mind. They spoke of Mr. Percy, a topic on which we may be sure they had but one opinion. Ruth's rapturous praise of him, though

caused by circumstances of which he was wholly ignorant, excited in him no astonishment—first, because he had the greatest regard for his old tutor; secondly, because he blessed him for the advice that had sent his cousin up to town; and, thirdly, because nothing she could have said would have seemed other than exactly just and fitting.

She asked him about his literary affairs, and he painted them in rose colour, for everything seemed to take that tint in her sympathising presence. Speaking of his own talents with unaccustomed modesty, he dwelt upon his capacity for work and the delight he took in it. "While admitting," he said, "the immense assistance I have received from Mr. Latham——"

"That was thanks to Sir Charles; we must not forget our magnificent friend," she put in with a touch of reproach, because he had not mentioned him. This was a terrible reminder, and chilled poor Lawrence's enthusiasm very much.

"I have reason to hope, however, that Mr. Latham now likes me on my own account."

"That is clear, my dear Lorry," she answered, "but we must not forget old friends. However, you tell me that you now feel confident of being able to make your own way."

"I do, though of course it is but a small way. My mother and you will of course come

and live with me, and I shall at least be able to keep the wolf from our door."

"Then you propose to keep us as well as yourself by your pen?" she inquired softly, gazing at the floor lest he should see the unbidden tears that filled her eyes.

"Well, of course; that is what I always had in view. How could it be otherwise? It is only that matters have been precipitated, for which I am truly thankful. Do you think that having you near me, under the same roof, seeing you every day, hearing the sweet voice that has always been my greatest encouragement, will not be reward enough for a little extra work. Even if one is not idle, to live all alone with none to love one is—is—well, it is not like *this*."

No, it was certainly not like that. Her hand had somehow fallen into his, and he held it close; his voice was tremulous with passion, and though her own was silent, it was with the silence of assent.

"You must not think me selfish, darling," he went on, "though it is selfish, you must not think me mad though others will, if I dare to ask that some day—a long way off, when I shall have found myself capable of supporting you, not, alas, as I should wish to do, but in some comfort—you will let me call you my very own. Do you love me just a little, little bit?"

"Now, this will not do," said Mrs. Merridew, who, from an unfortunate habit acquired in her attendance on Popsy, had got into the way of entering a room without noise, "I will not have Ruth upset, Lawrence, or made miserable by anybody."

Ruth managed to say, though in a rather low and tearful voice, that so far from being miserable, she was exceedingly content with her lot in life.

Mrs. Merridew cast one sharp glance at the young people, and replied very unexpectedly, "And so you ought to be;" then added, much to her son's relief, "I am sure these lodgings are all we could wish for, and much better than we could have expected. Your friend, Miss Latham, is a dear, and has got us quite what we wanted, don't you think so, Lorry?"

"I think they are very nice rooms, though not a bit nicer than Ruth—and you—deserve," he said.

"But they strike you, no doubt, as Mr. Latham (and he is a dear also) thought they would, as a little too expensive."

"I never thought anything of the kind," cried Lawrence, with a quick flush; "Mr. Latham had no right——"

"I will not have Lawrence teased or kept in the dark any longer, mother," exclaimed Ruth,

with indignation. It had been usual with her when they were quite alone to call her aunt, who had, indeed, supplied the place of a parent to her, by this endearing title; but it had now a new significance. "He has been telling me how he intends to work his fingers to the bone, and rack his brain, that you and I may be kept in comfort," she went on. "Mr. Latham has told us the same, but we knew it all before, did we not?"

"Yes, I knew I had a good son," said Mrs. Merridew, intending to be heroic and philosophic, but crying very much, and looking much more like a British mother than a Roman one.

"A very wilful son, I am afraid," said Lawrence.

"You're a dear," said Mrs. Merridew, embracing him, "a *dear*. Tell him all about it, Ruth, for I can't, and that's flat."

Mrs. Merridew had certainly not the talent for diplomacy, nor even, as it seemed, the art of "breaking" things, which her niece had exhibited.

"Well, the fact is, Lorry dear," said Ruth, "that our good friend, Mr. Percy, in addition to all the other benefits he has conferred upon your mother and me, has found us a fortune. Poor Aunt Jerry, though neither he nor she thought she had really anything to leave, left a will

behind her. It seems that in obedience to her husband's wishes she had never parted with certain shares in the Common Wheal mine, that has been shut up years, but is now being worked again with the most astonishing results. These shares, Mr. Percy tells me, are worth a great deal of money—more than £10,000."

"And has Aunt Jerry left all that money to mother?" exclaimed Lawrence delightedly.

"Well, to whom else should she leave it?" replied Ruth; "she was not likely to leave it to Aunt Jane, nor yet to grandfather, who have plenty of their own."

"Of course not. Nor yet to *me*," observed Lawrence smiling. "However, I bless her memory with all my heart."

"And I," said Ruth fervently.

"And I," said Mrs. Merridew. "She was a dear. So now you understand why your mother has established herself so luxuriously, and will have no need to pinch and screw for the rest of her life."

"This is good news, indeed," exclaimed Lawrence rapturously. "Though I still don't see," he added reproachfully, "why I was not made happy by it hours ago. Was it to try me? Was it to find out whether I was easily discouraged, or shrank from the responsibilities that love and duty equally imposed upon me?"

"No, it was not," cried Mrs. Merridew vehemently, almost sharply. "Ruth never doubted you for a moment, and I—am I not your own mother?"

"Thanks, darling," replied Lawrence, deeply moved. "I am quite satisfied, and do not seek to know any further." In his heart he thought it was Mr. Percy who had shown a want of confidence in him in this matter, but he could have forgiven him more than that. But it was not Mr. Percy, nor was the young fellow admitted even yet to the full possession of the family secret.

CHAPTER XLI.

ALL'S WELL.

As there was plenty of room in the Cheshunt Street house, it was only natural that Lawrence Merridew should exchange his quarters for his mother's roof; after which another occurrence became so much more natural, that it is hardly necessary to mention it. Since Lawrence could keep himself, with something over, by his pen, and his income, though absurdly small when compared with what we are so often told "it is impossible to marry upon," he did not long remain a bachelor.

The home of the young couple was with his mother, with whom Ruth had lived too long on terms of sympathy and affection to have any of those disagreements which perhaps take place between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, more often in fiction than in fact. At all events, they never had any.

It was in some respects an ideal household. Had it been far less luxurious, it would have

seemed a seventh heaven to all three of them, compared with their experience of life at Hillsland. What they had was their own, not doled out by grudging and unloving hands, and every year, as Lawrence's brains became seasoned and his talents recognised, their small but sufficient means increased. There was nothing miraculous about the matter. To tell the honest truth, though Mrs. Merridew and Ruth were of another opinion, Lawrence Merridew was no genius. He was only a clever young fellow, with a decided taste for light literature. Neither fame nor fortune (to be called such) was within his reach; nor did he ever attain to them. But like scores, if not hundreds, of his fellows, he made in time considerable way in the calling he had chosen for himself; probably a larger income than he would have realised in any other more recognised and (so-called) safer profession for which he had no bent: certainly a much larger one than he would have made at Singapore. And then the pleasure of it! Of course, there are other callings in which men take the utmost personal interest, nay, even a delight, and where the gains are far greater; but I question whether any can compare, for genuine satisfaction, with that of literature, when accompanied with moderate success. It is hard work, but somehow comes with ease; it introduces those who follow it to charming company; since they

can take it with them wherever they go, they can go whither they please; and Lawrence took it home where he found most pleasure.

Above all—or what seemed to him above all—it requires no patrons. In a humble way—though he was not of a humble disposition, which, indeed, is seldom found in young gentlemen of letters—he was a very happy man. Whether he deserved to be so is for those who have read his history to decide; what is of more consequence, to his biographer at all events, he made Ruth happy. She was the very woman, indeed, he ought to have married. If he had married Kitty they would probably both have gone to the devil, though by different ways. Ruth with her "saving common sense" supplied what was wanting in him. There was one matter, just at first, in which, if she had not been overruled, she would have committed an imprudence, but Mr. Percy saw to that. It was in connection with the secret which, as has been said, was not disclosed to Lawrence. Nor did he learn it till after he had married her. He found that his signature was necessary to a certain deed of settlement by which the sum of £11,000 was secured to his wife. "But this belongs to my mother," he said; but he was mistaken.

Aunt Jerry had left these Common Wheal shares to Ruth, as Mrs. Merridew had informed Mr. Latham in her letter; it was necessary to

do so to account for what would otherwise have seemed an unreasonable extravagance in her requirements in the way of lodging; and besides, she owed it to him, considering the trouble she was giving him (which his great kindness to her son alone encouraged her to do) to confide to him these circumstances. Out of this came, strangely enough, Ruth's unexpected readiness to accept her lover's proposal, which, to say the truth, was something of an agreeable surprise even to himself. Mr. Latham's sisters were very communicative to the newcomers, and talked to them, as was natural, very freely about Lawrence. They had never heard a word of Kate Salesby, and always imagined that the *tendresse* they knew him to entertain was for his cousin, and they took it for granted that she was aware of it.

It was no doubt a very welcome piece of news to her (nor was it difficult for her to persuade herself that it was no news), and scarcely less so to Mrs. Merridew, the desire of whose heart had always been that Lawrence's affections should have turned in that direction, if only, alas! the thing had been practicable, which now, by this windfall, it had got to be. On the other hand, Mr. Latham at once perceived the injudiciousness of letting Lawrence into the secret. He had had too recent an experience of that young gentleman's independence of character

and resentment of pecuniary favours, not to foresee an obstruction to the course of true love in the fact of Ruth being thus well provided for. Indeed, if the editor had known the whole truth, that up to that time Lawrence had not thought of Ruth as his wife at all, he would have had very good reason to conceal from Lawrence her accession to fortune. He could hardly have made that sudden proposal to her on finding she was an heiress. And, even as it was, Mr. Latham feared that the young fellow's false pride might interpose between him and happiness. Mr. Latham was of an independent nature himself, and had secretly very much applauded his young friend's disinclination to take advantage of Sir Charles's generous offer, even before the baronet's conduct had made all obligation impossible. But the present circumstances were wholly different. It seemed monstrous to him that an unexpected prosperity should part two loving hearts; and what also weighed with him was the reflection that a moderate competence was the very thing that Lawrence stood in need of. There is a great deal of nonsense talked about the matter. Whatever objections may be urged against a small independence, they apply with greater force against a large one (though nobody objects to *that*); while it is, at all events, greatly preferable to having nothing at all.

Moreover, it would not, as is generally said of its possessors, make Lawrence idle, for he loved his work for its own sake; and, indeed, in literature, of all professions, something to fall back upon in the case of illness or ill-health is, like learning (only very much better), "most excellent."

Mr. Latham was therefore most persistent in advocating secrecy upon this point, and neither Mrs. Merridew nor her niece was in a position to oppose this view. And thus it happened that Lawrence married in ignorance of his having drawn a pecuniary prize in Ruth, independently of her own merits. When he had done it, he was obliged to put up with that drawback, for fanciful as the reasons for divorce are said to have become, nobody has yet put away his wife on the ground of her being an heiress.

There was another secret between the young couple, not so directly revealed, and, indeed, though it was to some extent common property, seldom alluded to by either of them, namely, that dead and gone *tendresse* of Master Lawrence for Kitty. I say "Master Lawrence," because Ruth always spoke of it—whatever she may have thought of it—as a mere boyish folly. If there was anything serious in it, it was Kitty's fault, who, it had been abundantly manifested, was capable of going considerable lengths in flirtation. This was not quite Lawrence's view.

They also entertained a difference of opinion as regarded that patron of letters, Sir Charles Walden.

Lawrence could never forgive his conduct with respect to Kitty, and indirectly it must be owned to *him*, whereas Ruth persisted in picturing him as more or less of a victim, an idea which would have amused that gentleman himself exceedingly. Lawrence playfully attributed this charitable conception of Sir Charles's character to the tender friendship that he had once exhibited for Ruth, but as a professed student of human nature it is probable that he privately set it down to the right cause. In his heart of hearts, even when denouncing him, he never forgot the friendship he had shown him, fully recognised it as having been genuine, and even secretly acknowledged that but for it he might have been at Singapore.

In this world the very last things that may be expected to do so sometimes work together for our good. Lawrence saw a good deal of the world in his time, but in the picture gallery of his memory Sir Charles Walden always remained the most remarkable figure. He never saw him again, nor Kitty either.

This was also the case with his grandfather and Aunt Jane; to have met them would have been hardly less embarrassing, and in all senses he could well afford to dispense with their acquaint-

ance. Lawrence Merridew and his wife had soon plenty of friends, though the Lathams and Mr. Percy (who, by-the-bye, married them) remained the chief. In any case, however, the ex-Commissioner ("the Rajah," the "Satrap") was not the great man he had been; notwithstanding his horror of gambling, intensified no doubt by the examination of certain documents of his son Robert, which astonished him very much, he fell from his pride of place, through dabbling in mining shares that did not turn out so well as those which had been "stuck to" by Aunt Jerry. He had to leave the Hall, and what was worse, to take Aunt Jane with him, a person hardly fitted to be a cheerful companion in adversity. Hillsland knows them no more: but it has a permanent record of one of the family in a very handsome monument erected in the churchyard by his sorrowing widow to that "best of husbands," Robert Stratton, Esq., J.P., D.L.

THE END.

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